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Divisions Appear Within a Storm Recovery Commission

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By [GARY RIVLIN](#)

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NEW ORLEANS, Oct. 29 - The president dined with its members during one of his many trips to New Orleans. Its mandate is no less ambitious and grand than a master plan by year's end that will serve as the blueprint for rebuilding the city.

Yet a month after the creation of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission by Mayor C. Ray Nagin - before it has even had a chance to take up basic procedural questions - there are already signs the commission is in trouble. It is struggling to focus on major rebuilding issues rather than smaller complaints, and sharp divisions have begun to develop among its members.

The group was created as the principal advisory panel to the mayor, intended to deal with the looming political and financial questions that face the city as it staggers back to life after Hurricane Katrina. The mayor routinely defers to the commission when asked about long-range rebuilding questions, saying such matters are its responsibility.

But several commissioners believe they have been granted secondary status among the membership, saying they are a kind of B-team whom the others do not invite to the private luncheon that precedes the group's weekly meetings, held each Monday afternoon.

"No one goes over with us what they discuss at those lunch meetings," said Oliver M. Thomas Jr., one of the commission's 17 members and president of the City Council. "It would be nice if they did."

Added W. Anthony Patton, a small-business owner on the commission, "Let's just say I haven't been invited to any lunches, either."

Joseph C. Canizaro, a local real estate developer who played a leading role in the creation of the commission, regularly attends the lunches. Mr. Canizaro described himself and his fellow attendees as "a few friends of the mayor's who gather to help the mayor with advice and such."

"It's really entirely separate and apart from the commission," he said.

And others voice an opposite complaint: that the open format of the meetings discourages an honest debate over the tough issues of race and class that lie ahead. The meetings are broadcast on a local cable station, and some members say colleagues are playing to the cameras.

"I'm going to be criticized for saying this, but if my fellow commissioners keep on throwing out motions on the floor that we pass without any discussion, just to gain applause, it's just not going to work," Mr. Canizaro said.

At last Monday's meeting, Mr. Thomas asked his fellow commissioners to commit formally to rebuilding the Ninth Ward, an impoverished, largely black and heavily damaged area that some experts have said is too environmentally precarious to be rebuilt. Mr. Canizaro abstained, but Mr. Thomas's resolution otherwise passed unanimously without debate. That prompted commissioners both black and white to grumble about the wisdom of making commitments before they have had a chance to discuss an issue.

"I'm a little concerned that members of the commission are starting to use the meetings to cater to certain constituencies and stakeholder groups they know are watching," Scott S. Cowen, a member and the president of Tulane University, said.

Still other members complain that the panel's meetings are devolving into protracted gripe sessions that have nothing to do with devising a workable plan to rebuild the city. Last Monday, for instance, more than an hour of public comment was taken up by residents angry about recovery jobs being filled by outsiders, business owners wanting government contracts and complaints about the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

At that meeting, Daniel F. Packer, the chief executive of the New Orleans subsidiary of the Entergy Corporation, tried to persuade his fellow commissioners that the task before them was daunting enough without the additional burden of "trying to solve all the problems that come along." Mr. Packer had only limited success, as several commissioners took up the residents' causes.

Even Mayor Nagin, in an interview on Tuesday, expressed concern that so much of the meeting was devoted to New Orleanians who were looking to the commission to solve problems that should be dealt with elsewhere.

"I'm not saying we'll have a perfect process, but we do have a process," he said. "And the process will get better as we move forward if we continue to work together."

The City Council said it would form its own advisory commission on the same day the mayor announced his. Three weeks later, Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco named a 23-member commission she called the [Louisiana Recovery Authority](#). It will focus on the rebuilding of South Louisiana.

The City Council's commission, Mr. Thomas said, will consist of people "who can roll up their sleeves and come out with some real recommendations. Concrete stuff that the city can act on."

Yet even Mr. Thomas acknowledged that Mr. Bush's decision to eat dinner with the mayor's commission in early October had given it an advantage over the other commissions, neither of which existed at the time.

Donald T. Bollinger Jr., a commission member and a local shipbuilder, said, "Him coming in and having dinner with this group and meeting with our group helped sanction us and differentiates us from other groups."

Still, Mr. Bollinger also questioned the commission's ability to meet the president's challenge to devise a plan that is complete with specific suggestions. "Can this group actually get anything done?" he asked. "That's a worry. I kind of question that myself."

Some members of the commission had assumed that the group would meet in private to thrash out everything from the fate of the city's lowest-lying neighborhoods to a reform plan for a school system that was scandal-plagued before it also became waterlogged.

"I think we're at the point where the commission has risk as to whether or not it's going to be able to make the tough decisions we need to make," Mr. Canizaro said.

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