

# Mr. Coats Goes to Washington

Sep 24 2005

On Wednesday Marc Rosenblum, Tim Ruppert, and Geoff Coats — three residents of New Orleans — spent a day in Washington, DC talking with our representatives and their staffs about the rebuilding of our city. Our primary goal was to ensure that the people of New Orleans have a say in all decisions affecting our communities.

We met with Congressman William Jefferson and his Legislative Counsel J. Todd Metcalf, Zachary Rimmele, Legislative Assistant to Congressman Bobby Jindal, and Kevin Avery, Legislative Counsel to Senator Mary Landrieu. We also stopped by the offices of Congressman Charlie Melancon and Congressman Richard H. Baker and dropped off a copy of our talking points.

Conversations were good and ranged over many topics. In each meeting we stressed several core ideas:

Need for citizens of New Orleans to have a voice in rebuilding of the city. We suggested a local citizen's commission with oversight of planning and contracts. We stressed that this must include representatives from each neighborhood and not just politicians and Chamber of Commerce types. We also requested that any initial contracts be short-term (6 months) so that returning local companies are not locked out of the rebuilding process.

Open, Public, and Timely release of all information related to environmental hazards caused by the flooding.

Massive reconstruction of the wetlands in south Louisiana along with repair and improvements to the levee system.

Support and funding for the CDC's Healthy Cities Initiative as a vehicle for accomplishing both short-term and long-term reconstruction goals including removal of toxic materials, rebuilding of walkable and bikable communities, ensuring access to healthy foods for all residents of the city, and ensuring access to appropriate medical care for all members of the community.

Elimination of local match requirements for transportation projects in New Orleans. This would allow construction of streetcar lines and other infrastructure using 100% federal funds.

During each conversation we heard a great deal about comprehensive legislation that is being drafted by The Louisiana Delegation. Each member of the Delegation has taken responsibility for drafting different aspects of the legislation so no one person or office could speak comprehensively about the full package. Nevertheless, some outlines became clear. Everyone talked about tax credits and incentive packages to assist / encourage businesses and individuals to return to New Orleans. Several people talked about expansion of historic tax credits for renovation and rehabilitation of historic properties. Everyone agreed that coastal restoration and an improved levee system are part of the legislative package.

Some differences were apparent as well. Our suggestion for local oversight was welcomed by Congressman Jefferson's office where they have already been studying the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation as a potential model that allows politicians, citizens, and businesspeople to oversee reconstruction efforts. Senator Landrieu's office, however, appeared less interested in the issue of local oversight. They told us it would not be practical as it would slow down the process too much. Senator Landrieu appears to favor appointing an independent inspector to oversee the reconstruction and fight fraud. We noted that while this addressed the fiscal concerns it did not address the larger and more important issue that citizens deserve a voice in decisions that could fundamentally alter the landscape of our city.

Both Landrieu's and Jefferson's office were very interested in open, public, and timely release of all information related to environmental hazards caused by the flooding. Landrieu's office, in particular, asked about how we might ensure proper oversight of reports issued by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). One possibility we suggested was that the National Academy of Sciences review and certify EPA findings. Jefferson's office noted that environmental concerns are not just an issue for residents but that developers, banks, and businesses want to know as well to avoid future liability.

Everyone we spoke with acknowledged the need to ensure that the rebuilding of the city reinforce its historic and urban nature. How to accomplish this was still unclear. The requirement for a local match for federal funds has already been eliminated for Medicare, Medicaid, and Unemployment. Eliminating it for transportation projects has been discussed and appears to have a good chance of passing.

We came away from our meetings encouraged and ready to begin the rebuilding process; hopeful that the people of New Orleans will have the support we need at the highest levels of our government to ensure that the people who live in the communities of New Orleans will be able to direct the rebuilding process. We also acknowledge that there are significant challenges. One of the greatest may be the federal government's desire to "do something" after having been caught unprepared for Katrina. Four \$100 Million no-bid contracts have already been awarded for reconstruction. More ominous for local workers and businesses, the appropriations bill already passed simultaneously eliminated the need for compliance with prevailing wage laws (meaning that workers will be paid less) and raised the limit on purchases subject to the small business / minority contractor protections — from \$15,000 to \$250,000 (meaning that any purchase under \$250,000 is exempt and can be sourced anywhere — no need to worry about local or minority firms).

As our representatives work on the final version of the major appropriations bills, we need to ensure that they hear from residents of New Orleans. They need to hear that we are ready and able to rebuild our city and that we must have a voice in all decisions. New Orleans cannot be rebuilt exactly as it was. By definition, this means that some difficult and potentially painful decisions will have to be made as we move forward. New Orleanians need to make these decisions together. So that together we can mourn the losses and together we can celebrate the renewal and rebirth of the city we love.

Missing all of you,

[Geoff Coats](/about/geoff-coats)

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Principals

The Urban Conservancy