

“BEYOND THE RHETORIC”

Harry C. Alford ☐

Positive Update on New Orleans

To the frustration of major news corporations there is a steady and progressive improvement in the economic status of New Orleans. The Big Easy is indeed improving despite a major program to slam it as the “murder capital”, “hopeless community”, etc. Don’t believe it. If you care why not go visit this city that is rising from the devastation of two major hurricanes? It would totally surprise you and make you a very happy traveler.

This year’s Mardi Gras had over 700,000 participants, which says that the good times have returned. Last month, the Essence Festival returned and participants were as happy as ever. It was a wonderful event that rivaled previous festivals. The hotels were swamped, the nightclubs were jammin’ and the Super Dome was rocking as ever. Yes, it is coming back and no matter what the “4th Estate” tries to put into your mind progress is quite evident. The people of New Orleans who were betrayed by the federal government of the United States are showing a massive amount of resilience, faith and courage. Piece by piece and step by step, the City is putting it all back together.

The National Black Chamber of Commerce held its annual convention in New Orleans for the second year in a row. Our commitment is to keep coming back until the rebuilding is complete. Oh, how I wish other Black organizations would join in on that commitment. If not us, who? Last year we examined the mission before us. This year we examined our plans and how we shall implement them. It is our hope that next year we can take pride in the accomplishments that will come during the next twelve months. That’s the beauty of coming back every year until the job is done. It holds us accountable and keeps us focused.

Everyone noticed the activity all around our venue. The streets were well populated with tourists and the restaurants were packed. The French Quarter is becoming more and more vibrant. We didn’t here one complaint from our participants. The key word as a local reporter noted after interviewing convention participants was “Hope”. We all believe that the come back is coming and we don’t need to wait for any government activity to do it.

We have the interest of our “Cream of the Crop”. Some of our largest developers such as Don Peebles, KBK Enterprises, Columbia Residential and others are starting to either invest or seriously put together proposals. Significant Black owned construction managers have their executives on the ground looking for the right project and making partnerships with local contractors. We have various NBCC members putting together training programs. Companies from Atlanta, Maryland, etc. are structuring training initiatives for people living in New Orleans public housing. We are going to take these graduates and put them in business as Section 3 companies, which make them eligible for set-asides for HUD, funded projects. Even the State of Louisiana has started a viable Section 3 program via the Road Home project and we applaud and support that.

To our pleasant surprise, the US Army Corps of Engineers has replaced personnel and has started a more aggressive initiative in contracting. They have already utilized one of our newly formed joint ventures and that encourages us to continue matching out of state businesses with local entrepreneurs trying to bounce back from the disaster. It is working and we have only just begun. Engineering, architectural, telecommunications, construction, IT, etc. it is all starting to take form. With continued growth and documented best practices we are going to turn this City into a boomtown. The opportunities are certainly there and we can only go up.

During the convention we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Association of Minority Contractors so that we can merge their database into our plans for large venture formulation. With the large Black owned developers starting to invest into New Orleans we can present them with a ready construction base. This is going to generate recycled dollars for the city and provide a massive job market for those residents who want to be trained.

Our African entrepreneurs traveled to the convention also and the collaboration has begun between them and aspiring international traders within the NBCC ranks. All activities will keep the thought of the Port of New Orleans and local business activity in mind. I’m going to Ghana next month to follow up and make sure these new initiatives come to reality.

In essence, it appears that we have built a foundation and now we must seize upon the opportunity. New Orleans is going to be all right. Consider joining in on the greatest renaissance in the history of the United States. It’s New Orleans baby!

Mr. Alford is the co-founder, President/CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce.

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