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Recreation Reform: Leveling the Playing Field in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Arnie D. Fielkow¹ with Mithun B. Kamath²

Between 2000 and 2005, I was in charge of every aspect of the New Orleans Saints' non-football operations, from ticket sales to corporate sponsorships to lease negotiations for the Superdome. By spring 2007, though, by some combination of fate, determination, and maybe a little naiveté, I found myself in charge of legislatively repairing the City of New Orleans' entire system of recreation. I quickly discovered that this was no small task.

To add some context: I moved to New Orleans in 2000 to become executive vice president of the Saints. Five years later, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, changing the lives of many thousands of people living in New Orleans and along the coast, including my family and me. For many long months afterward, I was unsure of what to do next. In all that time, while my mind wandered far and wide considering the direction in which my professional life might be headed, I never gave a thought to abandoning the adopted hometown with which my family and I had fallen in love. I soon realized that I did not have to support the city's rebuilding merely by living there but that I could play an active role in that recovery by running for an at-large seat on the New Orleans City Council. In May 2006, I won that seat, and, at my request, I was appointed chair of the Council's Youth and Recreation Committee. I asked for that assignment because of my sincere belief in the power of sports to unify diverse individuals and groups. I thought that recreation, as much as any other government program, had a chance to help bring New Orleans back. By fall 2006, I was working to put back together the pieces of a recreation department that had been deteriorating for decades even before Katrina. Restoring the recreation department was as important to me in the wake of Katrina as the rebuilding of actual infrastructure.

The New Orleans Recreation Department (NORD) was created by ordinance in 1946 as a department directly under the purview of the mayor of New Orleans. For many years, NORD was the epitome of a well-run municipal agency, even inspiring a United States Supreme Court Justice to cite it as "the most progressive" recreation department in the country.¹ Continually underfunded and understaffed, though, NORD was in such a dire state when I arrived on the city council sixty years later that the equipment looked as though it had been on the department's first purchase order. To make matters worse, the quality of recreation in New Orleans showed an undeniable racial disparity—NORD-owned facilities and programs (used primarily by African American residents) were very different from those owned and operated by private organizations (used primarily by white residents), such as the Carrollton Boosters Club, to which my own three sons belonged. The irony of the Carrollton Boosters facilities when I joined the city council was that they were located in the middle of Hollygrove, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city.

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Compared to the private groups, NORD was not financially or organizationally sound, as was readily apparent in the poorly maintained fields, the old uniforms and equipment, and the coaches, who had the best of hearts and intentions but little to no formal training. Even before Katrina, but especially after, this disparity gnawed at me personally and professionally. My colleagues on the Youth and Recreation Committee and I sought to make the system more fair and to ensure that the city's recreation services were rebuilt to a standard well beyond the one in which they had wallowed before the storm.

It all started with input from citizens. If there was any silver lining to Hurricane Katrina, it was the colossal increase in vigorous citizen participation in government—an essential component of a government that works well for its constituents—and that included recreation. With no particular agenda in mind, we set out to hear about the way that the city had run NORD over the years from the people that knew the issue best—those who used (or least attempted to use) the department's limited resources.

We also called committee meetings to hear from NORD's administrators about what they were doing in the short- and long-term to improve citizens' access to recreation activities. It was not the sexiest post-Katrina recovery issue on which I was working, and the hearings themselves were not always pretty either. They put on display a severe dysfunction that was exemplified by the department's nonsensical approach to its facilities' hours of operation and the high turnover of the leadership of NORD, which had twelve different directors between 1978 and 2008.² But that was the point—we wanted and needed to get into the nitty gritty of the policies and operations to determine, for example, why there were weeds all over our city's playgrounds. Much of what we learned revealed to us what a city should not be doing with its recreation department.

Finally, we learned a great deal from Baton Rouge. Our neighbor to the west is often chided for being New Orleans lite, but, we discovered, when it came to recreation services, Baton Rouge was miles ahead of us. BREC, the acronym given to the recreation program in East Baton Rouge Parish, had won several awards, and we were lucky to be able to turn to it as a model for best practices.

The recommendations we received were many and varied, but over the course of numerous public hearings and listening sessions between 2007 and 2008, the one thing that we heard time and again was that recreation in New Orleans needed proper funding. We found, however, that citizens were not asking for blank checks or allocations well out of proportion with the city's budget but were asking only for the bare minimum amount they believed the city should have been devoting to NORD all along. For example, between 1985 and 1991—following the oil bust of the mid-1980s—NORD's annual budget was cut from \$6.2 million to \$2.2 million, which in 2010 dollars amounted to a cut from \$12.5 million to \$3.5 million, a staggering decline.³ The challenges were pushing for recreation as a priority when there were so many other rebuilding priorities facing City Hall and then cutting through the red tape to access whatever funds were available. I certainly did not envy the position in which Mayor Ray Nagin and his team, as well as the state and federal governments, found themselves in the aftermath of the storm, but I was disappointed by the many roadblocks they all put up as we on the committee tried to make progress on the provision of recreation services. Delays were often instituted in the name of fiscal responsibility, but I suspect many had more to do with lack of political will and, sadly, lack of appetite for reform. The Nagin administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were frustratingly unwilling or unable to coordinate logistics and stalled on the most basic of repairs and constructions despite my pleas and those of others for urgency—even when the funds were supposedly there for the taking.⁴

Partly for that reason, one recommendation piqued my interest more than the others—it was suggested that New Orleans simultaneously address the structural and the financial issues associated with recreation by moving key pieces of NORD out of city government, with its inherent politicization and unpredictability. Proponents believed that administration of recreation services by a quasi-independent board and CEO as part of a “public-private partnership,” still accountable to city government and with council oversight but not completely beholden to the mayor or any other individual, would result in increased efficiency, and moreover, that less of a reliance on limited and discretionary public funds in favor of corporate and other private funds would result in a more stable budget year after year. It was a revolutionary idea but one that I immediately believed had merit. After all, since post-Katrina New Orleans had become a laboratory for so many other innovative ideas—the education system most notable among them—why not recreation, too, if the idea was feasible? And what did we as a city have to lose? In July 2008, almost three years after Katrina, the nonprofit organization Greater New Orleans Afterschool Partnership formally presented the Youth and Recreation Committee with the proposal to revamp recreation in New Orleans with a public-private partnership model similar to BREC in Baton Rouge. As I said at the committee hearing (and still believe today), NORD was not in need of a Band-Aid but in need of a major overhaul, and in my mind the public-private partnership was the solution.⁵

With the end goal now clearly defined, a smooth approval and implementation process was imperative. By the time of the proposal, I had my legs under me as a public official, and I was confident that I could lead the recreation effort legislatively—and yet one of the best decisions I made in the entire process was to build an all-star team of private sector advocates to work with me. In the attorney Bobby Garon (also a personal friend whose sons played sports with mine), the Entergy CEO (and former University of Notre Dame football player) Rod West, and Roy Glapion Jr., a successful businessman whose father had also been a champion for high-quality recreation in New Orleans, I had beside me an array of well-known, well-respected, and well-spoken professionals who were passionate about creating equitable opportunities for New Orleans youth. They generously agreed to volunteer their time to lead a citizens advisory panel (CAP) so that reform of the city’s recreation programs could be a grassroots-driven rather than top-down project.

The CAP was tasked with figuring out important questions related to governance and financing, and after many public meetings it submitted its recommendations to the city council in August 2009. The panel called for the creation of a commission to lead the city’s recreation programs, with monetary support coming jointly from the city budget and a fundraising foundation that would have its own board of directors. Under the CAP’s plan, some commission members were to be appointed by the mayor, some by the city council, and some from other organizations—in contrast to the model used since 1946 that placed all control with the mayor. All meetings of the independent commission and its committees and all those of the fundraising foundation were to be open to the public, in line with the bottom-up approach that resulted in the reform proposal in the first place. In addition, the panel suggested that the duties of the parks department be merged with those of the recreation department so that the commission would also be in charge of the city’s recreation facilities.

With the report filed, one would assume that the CAP’s work was done—but I am proud to say that Bobby, Rod, Roy, and I went on to hold public meetings every month and separately meet with numerous neighborhood associations and residents to solicit further input, and we even created a website for that purpose.⁶ Not content just to lobby my fellow councilmembers and other public officials to support the proposal, I relished discussing the reform plan with the coaches, parents, and others most closely affected by NORD’s decline. I was heartened by the community’s

enthusiasm for our efforts to make the city's recreation system work and make it work for everyone. It was truly a grassroots movement in which all New Orleanians should take pride.

On citizen input, I would be remiss if I did not mention that there was certainly a vocal minority in support of the status quo. Those citizens unquestionably had every right to participate in the process, and I valued their opinions. They tended to focus on the privatization of a function that had always been a municipal responsibility and questioned whether racial and geographic disparities in the provision of recreation services would persist or even grow. Current NORD employees were also worried about losing their jobs. In my answer I would often reference my own sons' excellent experiences at Carrollton Boosters and ask detractors whether they thought the current NORD system was comparable. Dedicated private funding sources and continuity in leadership, I argued, could do more to reduce the inequities in different neighborhoods' facilities and equipment than anything the city could do on its own. Furthermore, I said, there would be more recreation jobs and other opportunities in New Orleans under the proposed initiative.

With keen awareness of these policy arguments for and against, my council office took the lead in the translating the CAP's report into proposed law—the city charter amendments and ordinances that would bring about the recommended reforms. On June 1, 2010 (in no small part because of my concerted lobbying, I like to think), the city council unanimously approved a package of measures that created the new, semi-autonomous New Orleans Recreation Development Commission (NORDC) and accompanying NORD Foundation, and newly sworn-in mayor Mitch Landrieu signed off shortly thereafter.⁷ Moreover, because of Mayor Landrieu's commitment to increase the city's budget allocation for recreation, it was determined that a property tax increase was not necessary, at least for the time being. Then, in early September, the council unanimously agreed on the impending commission's makeup and composition—it would consist of thirteen members, including the mayor and two other high-level administration officials, one councilmember, leaders from the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish School Board, the chairman of the City Planning Commission, one private citizen from each of the five council districts with expertise in or experience with recreation, and a representative of the NORD Foundation.⁸ It was a promising start but not nearly the end, since all changes to the city charter also require voter approval. NORDC was scheduled to be placed on New Orleanians' ballots in October 2010.

Meanwhile, I was thrilled to have overwhelmingly won re-election in February 2010, especially because it meant that I would be able to continue the push for recreation reform from my bully pulpit. Despite the "mandate" that some thought I had earned because of my relatively painless re-election, though, I felt that the NORDC vote was also a referendum on my first term. As such, I spent much of that summer and fall on the stump for the NORDC campaign—talking to voters and pitching the reform proposal, hearing their feedback, and requesting endorsements such as the ones garnered from the weekly business newspaper *New Orleans CityBusiness* and the good government organizations Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans and the Bureau of Governmental Research. In many respects, the campaign for recreation reform was among the most meaningful labors of love of my entire council tenure, and going to the playgrounds to urge coaches and parents to give recreation reform a chance provided me with some of the best moments of my public life.

In the end, I could not have dreamed of a better result. On October 4, 2010, the city charter amendment passed with a whopping 74 percent of the vote. Furthermore, in the 2011 city budget, Mayor Landrieu followed through on his funding promise to double the city's allocation to recreation to approximately \$10 million.⁹ Although the mayor did not go as close to total overhaul

as I and some of the other reformers would have liked, they were certainly delighted when the NORDC champion Roy Glapion Jr. was tapped to be the first chair of the new commission. Furthermore, the first CEO, Vic Richard—though a product of the old NORD system—embraced the public-private model. Vic thrived over the course of a successful tenure that lasted until 2018, exactly the type of leadership stability that we envisioned.

In addition to Bobby, Rod, and Roy, there are countless individuals inside and outside government that have earned my eternal gratitude for their essential leadership in the NORD reform process. Among them are my city council staff members, whose hard work, intellect, and dedication made me a better advocate for this new recreation system for New Orleans. I firmly believe that they represent the best of city government, and without them NORDC would never have come to fruition. I would also like to take this opportunity specifically to thank the people of the great city of New Orleans for entrusting me with the enormous challenge of reversing the downward decline of our city's recreation system for years to come.

Today, more than nine years after the public vote, the NORDC system is certainly not perfect and has a way to go to achieve the heightened quality and equality we set out to provide to all New Orleanians. I am comforted, though, every time I drive by one of the many facilities that has been built or renovated in diverse neighborhoods all over town with the help of FEMA, the City of New Orleans, and the NORD Foundation and its steady source of financial assistance—facilities such as Wesley Barrow Stadium in Pontchartrain Park, which was rebuilt to host the Major League Baseball Urban Youth Academy (New Orleans is the only city without an major league baseball team to have such an academy).¹⁰ I am also comforted every time I hear that the city's recreation system has earned a new award for excellence—such as the national accreditation it received in 2017 for the first time since such a recognition became available nearly twenty-five years earlier.¹¹

I was deeply involved in many issue areas during my six-year stint in public service, but the most near and dear to my heart, and the most rewarding, was recreation reform. My goal was, and still is, equity for all throughout the recreation system, and I am optimistic that the city is headed in that direction. I believe that the recreation overhaul will have reached its full potential when all New Orleans youth and seniors, irrespective of neighborhood or race, will have the first-class recreation experience my own children enjoyed. I am looking forward to the day when a game between a Carrollton Boosters team and a NORDC team can be played at either team's facility without anyone noticing any difference.

Notes

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¹¹ Beau Evans, “New Orleans Recreation Department Earns National Accreditation for First Time,” nola.com, September 26, 2017, https://www.nola.com/archive/article_414b3c86-c264-5829-be07-ee46bb7b7ca9.html.