



Everything New Orleans

Economics panelists compare post-Katrina New Orleans and Europe



Martin Heintel, geography professor at the University of Vienna in Austria, discusses economic development and disaster recovery comparisons between Europe in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans at a workshop at the University of New Orleans on Monday, Oct. 21, 2013. *(Mark Waller, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)*

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Speakers at an economics workshop at the **University of New Orleans** on Monday drew parallels between Europe and post-**Hurricane Katrina** New Orleans. The event included experts from UNO,

professors and officials from Austria, speakers from other universities in the United States and representatives of economic development groups.

In an afternoon session, Martin Heintel, geography professor at the University of Vienna who also served a stint at UNO in 2006-07, showed aerial pictures of flooding from the Danube River in German and Austrian communities earlier this year that was reminiscent of the imagery of rooftops in the water after Katrina and described the reactions of individuals, news media, emergency managers and political leaders to the floods in both places, complete with pictures of high-ranking Austrian officials inspecting flood gates and standing in water wearing rubber boots.

Heintel assessed news media criticisms after Katrina as focusing on disaster management failures while the more recent European flooding brought criticism about the distribution of resources. He cited the importance of symbolic wins in recovery, such as the 2006 reopening of what is now called the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans.

Since spending time in New Orleans in the earlier aftermath of the storm, Heintel said, he is impressed with the city's renewed vitality, from individuals taking responsibility for rebuilding to a recent a drive through a revived City Park, he said.

"Now there are so many tourists here again and the conventions are back again," he said.

He described similar challenges on the two continents with managing development on topographies that include risks.

"We also have flood gates," he said. "These flood gates are very expensive."

"We have so much settlement in very dangerous areas," he said about development in Austria, which is driven by local decisions.

Speaking from the New Orleans perspective in an afternoon session with Heintel was Michael Hecht, president of the Greater New Orleans, Inc., economic development group, who presented a familiar timeline of recent decades of New Orleans economic history, from a long decline to a crisis point with Katrina to a recent rebound characterized by attitude changes in the business climate, state incentives to lure businesses, a revamping of the public education system and other often-cited factors.

He said Katrina gave New Orleans a kind of head start on the national recession, which it then could endure better than the rest of the country with what he described as \$150 billion in recovery investments incoming.

"It's hard for a community not to benefit from \$150 billion," he said.

"Now we should be afraid," Hecht said. "Now we've actually climbed up a little, but now we can fall."

To avoid that, he described parts of the sales pitch he uses for attracting businesses to New Orleans, including tax incentives, education reforms and fundamental advantages such as the Mississippi River and a distinct culture.

At the same time, he said, coastal restoration is "our existential issue." Without it, by 2100, he said, "We would be a vacation spot at best."

The workshop, sponsored by UNO, the **Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation** and **CenterAustria** at UNO, also included an appearance from Wolfgang Petritsch, who was Austrian ambassador to the former Yugoslavia and helped run the diplomatic process to end the war there in the 1990s. Petritsch is now a fellow at Harvard University and chairman of the Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation, which aims to share economics and social sciences knowledge between Austria and the United States.

Among the other speakers was Aimee Quirk, economic development advisor for New Orleans city government, Franz Rossler, Austrian trade commissioner based in Chicago and Ronnie Hall, a policy developer for the **European Commission**, which is the policy arm of the European Union.