

REGIONAL ROUNDUP

Chesapeake Connect

BMC takes 60 regional leaders to New Orleans to observe post-Katrina successes, challenges



The clang of the trolley, bustle of Bourbon Street, blare of brass bands, and unmistakable sense of belonging combine – much like a good seafood gumbo – to make New Orleans a city unlike any other. With its vibrancy it's little wonder that *The New York Times* named the Big Easy as its No. 1 global destination in 2018.

For Baltimore, New Orleans offers many opportunities for comparison and learning. It's a model of rebranding and rebuilding 13 years into its recovery from the catastrophic effects of Hurricane Katrina.

"New Orleans and its residents have come back stronger and in a full embrace of meaningful and strategic planning post-Katrina," said Mike Kelly, BMC executive director. "They transformed their school system. They utilized data and training to

refocus their policing. They're rethinking how to combat flooding. And they're doing it all while staying true to the cultural identity that makes it such a special place."

These are a handful of reasons that BMC selected New Orleans as the destination for the 2018 Chesapeake Connect regional delegation trip. Now in its second year, Chesapeake Connect's goals are two-fold. First, the program highlights the strengths, challenges and lessons of a peer metropolitan region. Second, the experience builds and strengthens relationships between a select group of civic-minded leaders from Baltimore City and its surrounding counties.

"We're incredibly grateful for all of our hosts, participants and sponsors, who made this a memorable experience," Kelly said.

This year's 60-member cohort included representatives from sectors, including: healthcare, higher education, philanthropy, construction, finance and local government. The delegation was comprised of individuals from each of BMC's member jurisdictions who brought with them a range of experience and expertise.

"This experience was one of the best work-related trips that I've taken," said Melissa Hyatt, vice president for security at Johns Hopkins Medicine & Johns Hopkins University. "I was able to step away from my daily job and gain some real perspective about another region while meeting incredible people."

The trip kicked off on Wednesday, November 28, by inundating the delegation with the city's most prominent industry – culture and

tourism. Andy Kopplin, president and CEO of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, greeted the delegation with a keynote at the George & Joyce Wein Jazz & Heritage Center. Kopplin shared the story of the city's rebirth after Hurricane Katrina. The Greater New Orleans Foundation continues to leverage the strengths of government, businesses and nonprofits toward enhancing the region's economy and supporting residents at all levels of opportunity.

Stephen Perry, president and CEO of New Orleans & Company, the local visitors' bureau, spoke of the central role culture and tourism play in New Orleans' economy. For example, the Big Easy's cultural sector accounted for approximately 38,000 jobs, with musicians alone playing 31,000 gigs in 2016. In the same year, more than three million people attended the city's 136 festivals, generating an economic impact of \$904 million.

In addition, Jazz Fest will celebrate its 50th anniversary in Spring 2019, drawing in upwards of 400,000 visitors for 10 days of music, cuisine and crafts. Scott Aiges, director of programs, marketing & communications for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Foundation, Inc., spoke about how they use Jazz Fest revenue to invest in programs that support music education and local musicians.

"I was extremely impressed with the passion and knowledge shared by all of the speakers," said Milton Matthews, president and CEO of Columbia Association.

Providing high-quality public education for its residents emerged as a challenge as New Orleans struggled to rebuild following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Patrick Dobard, CEO of New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit capacity-building organization for charters, shared the



history of the shift in New Orleans - from chronically underperforming traditional public schools to the first all-charter school district in the country. He pointed to dramatic improvements in graduation rates and college entry as a result of the charter school movement. In addition, he attributed success to the freedom for charter operators to experiment with and identify new teaching methods, while applying increased accountability measures.

He also emphasized that shifting student culture and elevating academic expectations has been key. The delegation then toured the Andrew H. Wilson Charter School, one of the highest-performing schools in New Orleans. Jamar McKneely, CEO of InspireNOLA, the charter operator, spoke to the group about how the school is working to provide wraparound supports to its students, nearly all of whom live in poverty.

The delegation then broke into smaller groups for visits to the New Orleans Police Department, Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, The Pythian and Liberty's Kitchen. These breakout sessions offered an opportunity for more intimate conversations with each entity.

For example, Liberty's Kitchen, a nonprofit located alongside a Whole Foods in an economically depressed neighborhood, engages disconnected youth to train them for culinary and hospitality careers.

"It was great to hear from the students about their experience at Liberty's Kitchen," said

Stephanie Amponsah, executive director of the Urban Alliance. "I would love to see a Whole Foods in West Baltimore."

However, a trip to tour New Orleans would be incomplete without addressing the main reason why Katrina devastated the city – water. David Waggoner, principal of Waggoner & Ball Architects, spoke to the delegation about how New Orleans is rethinking the way that it prepares for another storm by "living with water."

Local leaders began developing a comprehensive plan to protect the city from future flooding, and Waggoner & Ball spearheaded the Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan in 2011. Waggoner and his staff provided a deep dive into their work in developing the plan, followed by a bus tour of one of the neighborhoods being redesigned around the water.

New Orleanians face two significant problems when it comes to water in 2018. First, roughly half of greater New Orleans is below sea level. Second, groundwater is causing large parts of the city to slowly sink.

"The engineering wonk and conservationist in me loved the water conversation," said Willy Moore, president of Southway Builders, Inc. "The blend of topics was perfect."

BMC staff and its Board of Directors will begin working together in January to identify the next Chesapeake Connect destination and topics. The next trip is scheduled for Fall 2019.

