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Robert W. Becker

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PERSPECTIVES ON THE 1984 WORLD'S FAIR

BY

ROBERT W. BECKER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

CITY PLANNING COMMISSION  
CITY OF NEW ORLEANS  
NINTH FLOOR-CITY HALL, CIVIC CENTER  
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA 70112

ABSTRACT

Planning is a difficult process in special events because it represents the putting together of an effective organization in a short period of time. Success in such endeavors depends upon the right mix of personnel and represents a total community effort. Public control and accountability are also extremely important to success.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE 1984 WORLD'S FAIR

INTRODUCTION

Now that the World's Fair has closed, it is sometimes difficult to reflect upon the last six or seven years and encapsulate in a brief article my opinions about the event. However, the following represents my thoughts on a variety of the important impacts of the Fair.

First, it is important to understand my perspective. As Director of the City Planning Commission, I and my staff were responsible for working with the Fair from the City planning perspective. Specifically, this meant working with the Fair on the development of the plan and eventually approving it. We also worked with the Fair Corporation on such diverse elements as the transportation plan, physical infrastructure planning, planning for Fair residual uses, and coordinating a variety of other activities from the Hazardous Materials Transportation Plan to controlling vending and building demolitions around the Fair site. Finally, one of our most important tasks was in helping to define the major residual benefits to be achieved from the Fair, and this is where the article should start.

## I. Major Goals and Successes

Our experience with the development of a World's Fair is a little like dealing with a freight train. The train starts out slowly and deliberately, gathering steam and momentum, after awhile the train has such force and momentum that it can not be deflected from its course so you better be sure its on the correct track from the beginning.

We believe the basic reasons for having a world's fair that we started with were all achieved by the event. In that sense we had the fair on the proper track in the beginning.

These basic reasons included:

1. Redevelopment of our central Riverfront area from an area that contained run down cargo wharves and rail yards to a modern multiple use area which has allowed our community to rediscover and utilize their riverfront.
2. Encourage the renovation of an adjacent Warehouse District.
3. Transform a 60 acre railroad into a future redevelopment site adjacent to the Central Business District.
4. Upgrade the physical infrastructure of the Fair site and surrounding area including the French Quarter.
5. Boost tourism during New Orleans traditional slow summer.

These were the principle goals we set out to achieve from the early days of the Fair's planning. While subsequently many other goals or achievements were envisioned, these basic residuals were the heart of our effort. There is little doubt that we have achieved each of these goals. There is also little doubt that without the vehicle of a World's Fair, we either would have never accomplished some of them or it would have taken several decades to achieve them. These are extremely important residual benefits which will benefit the City for many years.

## II. Problems

While we generally kept our principal goals in mind as we worked with the Fair corporation to achieve them, it goes without saying that any major event of this type carried a myriad of problems. The following is a brief summary of some of the most difficult problems and whether we successfully solved them.

### 1. Access to the Fair

The Fair was held in our Central Riverfront Area in our Business District and therefore presented serious access problems. To solve these, the City spent nearly \$25.0 million in a mile and a half from the Fair site, rebuilt over 20 intersections, erected over 1500 signs. We were very successful and never did have any serious

transportation problems.

## 2. Input into decisions made by the Fair Corporation

It was extremely difficult for the public to have input into the decision making of the independent, autonomous Fair Corporation. Since the Fair Corporation is the actual entity constructing and managing the Fair, this lack of capability to influence Fair corporate decisions as a serious problem. While the public gained representation on the Fair's Management Committee at later stages in the project, it was a serious problem never overcome.

## 3. Lack of Support from U.S. Government

From the very beginning of our involvement, the U.S. Government, from the President to the U.S. Department of Commerce, was extremely non-supportive of the Fair. Whether it was financial contributions, help with required approvals, or diplomatic assistance in getting foreign countries to participate in the Federal Government's lack of involvement was a serious problem which damaged the Fair from beginning to end.

## 4. Creation of an Entertaining and Educating Event

After the Knoxville experience which was not highly rated as an entertaining and educational event, the Fair had a serious problem to create an attraction that was educational, entertaining and representative of the culture and heritage of New Orleans and Louisiana. The Fair admirably solved this problem and created a universally admired event which was an unqualified entertainment and artistic success.

## 5. Drawing Required Attendance

During the Fair's planning, right up to virtually opening day, there was concern not whether the Fair would draw the projected attendance, but whether the Fair and the City could handle even larger crowds which were anticipated. Certainly the major disappointment of the Fair was the lack of attendance (7.3 million actual versus 11.0 million predicted) and the financial deficit the Fair incurred.

The reasons for the lack of attendance will be debated for years and include such reasons as, lack of regional population base, extremely adverse media relations, national economic slowdown, proximity to Knoxville's Fair, and poor marketing plan.

## 6. Financial Implications

Of course, as the Fair's attendance did not make projections, the financial situation deteriorated. The State of Louisiana and the City of New Orleans had to rescue the Fair several times during its run and as a result, an event that was to be held with no direct public subsidy ended up with over \$30 million in State subsidy and a significant cost to the City as well. Also, numerous contractors and concessionaires will lose a considerable amount of money. The end result is probably this will be the last World's Fair without pre-planned public subsidy.

### III. Conclusions

What is the impact of the Fair and what are its implications for future events? In this regard, a number of conclusions come to mind.

1. From a planning point of view, the Fair was a great success. It accomplished the major long range goals we started out to achieve and in the long run these achievements will, in my opinion, overshadow the problems. The event was tremendously entertaining and educational and greatly loved by the citizens of the City.

2. In the short run, the Fair's financial problems have been extremely adverse affecting not only those suffering economically but also the image of the City. One specific consequence of the economic difficulties has been the inability of the Fair to restore the site to post-Fair use. This is causing extreme problems as the City and private property owners attempt to restore this property and get on with life after the Fair.

3. It is an open question as to whether the City will suffer long term negative impacts as a result of the Fair's financial failures. Will its image and therefore capability to attract, new business and entrepreneurs suffer, will the City suffer in the State Legislature from rural legislators who are disturbed about the State subsidy, etc. Hopefully, these will only be short-run problems if they are problems at all.

4. Finally, we are now working to transform the tremendous residual benefits which have been left into a permanent resource to the City. The Rouse Corporation has signed a contract to create a festival market place on the river in a structure built by the Fair. Our new Convention Hall has opened for its first convention in the heart of the Fair site and the Gondola across the Mississippi River has resumed service.

#### SUMMARY

In summary, a World's Fair is an all encompassing experience totally absorbing a community in its planning, its creation and its duration. The rewards are very big for a Fair but so are the risks. A community must consider extremely carefully what goals it hopes to achieve and whether a World's Fair is the vehicle to achieve them. If it is, then the community must fully involve itself in every stage including controlling to a significant degree, the managing entity to ensure that the public's goals can be met since its the public's money which will be at stake.