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Saturday is deadline for giving opinion on recovery Residents challenged to give top priorities

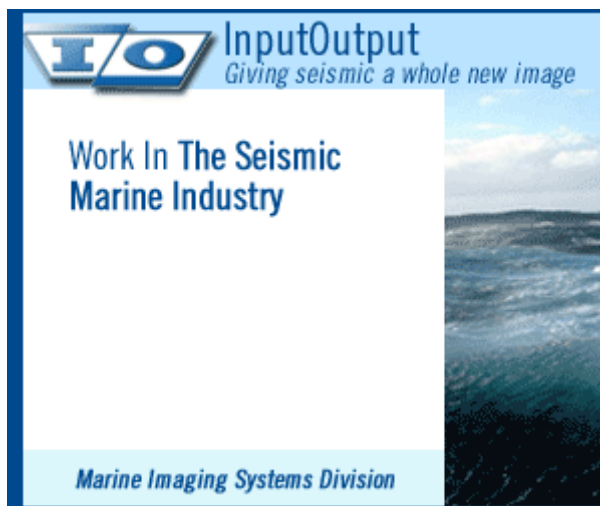
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By Carol Wolfram
St. Tammany bureau

Residents of southeast Louisiana have until Saturday to respond to Louisiana Speaks, the Louisiana Recovery Authority's initiative to plan for the recovery and future growth of the area.

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The questions being asked on the Louisiana Speaks response sheet challenge residents to identify their top priorities for economic development in Louisiana, weigh preferred growth plans, and consider what is the right mix of property rights and community risk.

The importance of citizen input was stressed Feb. 1 by Glen Bolen, senior associate at Fregonese Calthorpe Associates, the principal planner for Louisiana Speaks, who was the guest speaker at a joint meeting in Slidell of the Greater Slidell Area and the St. Tammany-West chambers of commerce.

Directing a PowerPoint presentation that demonstrated the impact of economic, land use and transportation models of development, Bolen said citizen input is most critical at this point.

That message was endorsed by John Smith, north shore president of Whitney Bank and member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

"This is an unprecedented opportunity for a do-over," said Smith, immediate past chairman of the board of the Slidell chamber. "We'll never get this opportunity again."

Smith encouraged residents to cast a vote for their preferred vision of the future of south Louisiana's economy, environment and community growth online at www.LouisianaSpeaks.org, by phone at (888) 752-6205, at public libraries and other venues.

"If you don't participate, don't complain," he said.

Smith is one of about a half-dozen north shore residents identified as champions of the Louisiana Speaks process.

Also identified by Louisiana Speaks as local champions are Richard F. Knight, chairman of the board, Resource Bank, Mandeville; Jimmy Maurin, chief executive officer, Stirling Properties, Covington; Marty Mayer, president, Stirling Properties, Covington; Hank Miltenberger, chief executive officer, Gilsbar Inc., Covington; and Todd Richard, chief executive officer, F.A. Richard and Associates, Mandeville. These individuals have agreed to represent their communities as Louisiana Speaks works toward the development of a long-term vision for south Louisiana.

Maurin also was on hand at the meeting to encourage residents to speak their mind.

"While we have been digging out, living the reality of getting back to normalcy, (Louisiana Speaks) has been spending the time at 30,000 feet, looking at the big picture, trying to decide, 'Where do we go from here?' " he said.

According to Bolen, those scenarios will be woven into a single unified vision for the future of 35 parishes representing more than 30,000 square miles.

"This is going to be your children's project, and their children's project," Bolen said.

Though Bolen hopes the community will rally to voice their opinions, he emphasized that "this is not a contest. We're not picking a 'winner.' This is about identifying the qualities that get support. What is the right balance of property rights and community risk."

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Jim Maurin, chief executive officer of Stirling Properties, Covington, left, looks on as Glen Bolen, senior associate at Fregonese Calthorpe Associates, principal planner for Louisiana Speaks, accepts an original piece of STARC artwork from Carl Fredericks, right, a member of the Greater Slidell Area Chamber of Commerce board of directors.