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GNO seeks role as leader

Regional agency redefines focus

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By Jaquetta White

Business writer

Greater New Orleans Inc. is a "broker" and no longer a "layer" in the effort to recruit and retain investment in the 10-parish metro region, the outgoing chairman of the regional economic development agency said Thursday.

Bill Oliver referred to the organization he has led for the past year as "the new GNO Inc.," as he and other leaders from the agency sought to reintroduce it to about 600 members of the regional business community during the group's fifth annual meeting.

"This was definitely an event that marked the public debut of Greater New Orleans Inc.," Michael Hecht, the group's president and chief executive officer, said after the meeting. "This was our coming out."

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Lt. Gen. Russel Honore delivered the event's keynote address.

GNO Inc. is a public-private group created in January 2004 to promote economic development in the 10-parish area that includes the parishes of Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard, Plaquemines, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, St. James, St. Tammany, Washington and Tangipahoa. The group is financed through grants from Louisiana Economic Development and contributions from "investors" that include regional businesses and parish governments.

But many of the organization's past efforts to stimulate growth in the region, particularly pre-Katrina, appeared haphazard. It was often unclear what role it played among the state's many agencies dedicated to economic development.

Hecht says GNO Inc. is establishing itself as a facilitator for them all. GNO Inc. has been working on a multipronged plan to revitalize the 10-parish region by focusing on four key industries:

international commerce, energy, aerospace and defense manufacturing, and creative media services.

"It's our job to turbo-charge your efforts," Hecht said to invited guests at the meeting.

In what will likely be the agency's first major win under Hecht, international air service will return to New Orleans for the first time since Katrina in the form of a daily flight to Mexico. Hecht would not give details about the change, which GNO Inc. helped to facilitate, but said that a "letter of intent has been signed."

The group is also partnering with the Idea Village in the development of a building that will exclusively house small technology and creative media companies, Hecht said.

But in the past nine months, since Hecht replaced Mark Drennen, who resigned in January 2008, much of the organization's focus has been on redefining itself, building relationships and setting goals.

"A lot of things had to happen in the last nine months to rebuild the organization," said **Marty Mayer, chairman of the GNO Inc. board and president and chief executive of Stirling Properties.** "This year, I think that the foundation has been laid and a year from now we'll have wins to point to."

In the past six months, the agency has revamped its Web site, started delivering an occasional e-mail newsletter and issued its first "regional review," a glossy, quarterly promotional magazine. The debut issue features a full-body shot of Michael Hecht, whom Oliver gleefully referred to as "the face of economic development for the 10-parish region" on the cover.

"Whereas they were good before, they are astoundingly great now," said Steve Kuiper, senior vice president of Acadian Ambulance Service, which is based in Lafayette and operates in the region. "The focus isn't just on big business anymore. They've really taken down that barrier so that every business can be represented."

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