



Everything New Orleans

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Shopping center players in N.O.

Mayor, property exec sell visitors on area

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About 850 shopping center owners, investors, site selectors, managers, retail-chain heads and academics have converged on the Hilton New Orleans Riverside for the Fall International Council of Shopping Centers summit, and Mayor Ray Nagin and Stirling Properties Chairman James Maurin were there to tell them Monday that if they weren't investing in New Orleans, they were missing the boat.

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The opportunities are not just local, Maurin said. "This is a tale of two storms. Not just about New Orleans that got all the press. This story is about the entire Gulf Coast from Mobile to the Louisiana-Texas border." In addition to helping lead Stirling Properties of Covington, Maurin is a trustee of the International Council of Shopping Centers, or ICSC.

"There's a lot of good things and a lot of challenges in this region. But if you focus on anything, it should be the incredible opportunity here. I don't think the retailers in (the) country understand how good it is here," Maurin said.

Asked about crime, he said, "We can talk about crime like any urban area. There are places you shouldn't go," he said. "Tourists are as safe here as any city in America."

Taking questions from the audience, Nagin fielded one about why the industry should invest in New Orleans.

"Well, if you like to make money, this is the best opportunity going," he said.

Maurin detailed the population and development shift that has occurred and also showed that opportunities locally stretch from New Orleans to Hammond to Baton Rouge.

He noted that retailers are moving to where families have moved: Gonzales, Baton Rouge, the Interstate 12 corridor, and St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes.

On population shifts, Maurin said those who are leaving and not returning to the area are the older population, while "for every retired person who leaves, two young people between the ages of 25 to 40 are moving in."

A great "brain" influx of young entrepreneurial-minded people are moving to the city, he said.

Maybe they're aware of the more than \$116 billion in federal aid that has been allocated by Congress for rebuilding the Gulf Coast region, including Louisiana.

He also told retailers and brokers that the Louisiana Recovery Authority's Road Home Program is as slow-moving as a bayou and that only 27 percent of the billions available have been awarded to homeowners.

He said billions in disposable income will be available if the Road Home program meets its current goal of processing 90 percent of all claims by the end of the year. "That's billions in disposable income," he said.

But he didn't ignore one of the biggest challenges that local businesses are facing: the rising cost of insurance.

Maurin said the ICSC as well as the National Association of Realtors has lobbied for a catastrophic insurance program mirrored after FEMA's flood insurance for wide-scale natural disasters. "We need something akin to (national) terrorism insurance," he said.

"Stirling had 12 major shopping centers go buck naked last year: no wind or storm insurance. We couldn't buy it. Why? It was unavailable. Thank God our lenders worked with us. It took me one year to get insurance for 12 properties at three times the rate (before Katrina) for half the coverage," Maurin said.

Nagin took some gentle ribbing for being one of the more "controversial" and "better-known" Louisiana political figures in the nation for his comments and sometimes rage during Katrina's aftermath.

Nagin also responded to questions about the lack of national retailers in the city. Just two weeks ago Borders announced it would move into the former Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue, the first chain bookstore to occupy a free-standing store in the city. Home Depot also is building one of the largest stores in its chain at Earhart Boulevard and South Claiborne Avenue.

"The frustration (for retailers) pre-Katrina was finding a site" in the city, Nagin said. "The availability of (land) now is unprecedented from the standpoint of sites. We'll move heaven and earth to move land for your" development, he told attendees.

ICSC members will be meeting in New Orleans through Wednesday. Sessions are open to the public for a fee, and people who want to attend can register on-site.

Founded in 1957, the International Council of Shopping Centers is the global trade association of the shopping center industry, with 70,000 members in the United States, Canada and more than 80 other countries. Information, agenda and registration prices can be found at www.icsc.org.

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