

Leaders push mission to help New Orleans

Recovery - The tour will connect Oregonians to the continued needs of the battered city

Friday, February 09, 2007

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A year and a half after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, the storm's effects linger on in New Orleans. Fewer than half the city's population remains, barely one in every four schools has reopened, and in the hardest hit areas, reoccupied houses sit marooned amid a sea of blight.

Civic leaders are betting a few dozen Oregonians care enough to want to do more than read those dire statistics.

Enter Flight of Friendship, New Orleans.

Like two similar endeavors in the wake of 9/11 and the 2004 tsunami and earthquake in Africa and Southeast Asia -- the mission is simple.

Tour the devastation. Volunteer to help with projects. Pour a few, much needed tourist dollars onto the area's hard-hit economy. And come home to advocate for continued attention on recovery efforts.

"This is a chance for people to engage on the ground," said co-organizer Sho Dozono, who conceived the trip after touring the Louisiana city with his wife Loen and Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore. Dozono and Mercy Corps, a Portland-based relief organization with 11 staffers leading projects in New Orleans, are hoping 50 to 100 people sign on for the four-day trip in April.

"There's still just so much to be done," said Mercy Corps' Sarah Chenven, who recently returned from working on the organization's projects in New Orleans.

"It's a great city, but it isn't what it was," said state Treasurer Randall Edwards.

Edwards attended a conference in the area in December along with about 600 other state treasurers. He toured. He listened. And he discovered the idea of rebirth he'd pieced together from a distance wasn't the full story.

"I came back with a sense of frustration. Sixteen months later, and we still have the same situation," he said.

Six years ago, 1,000 Oregonians joined the inaugural Flight for Freedom to New York City three weeks after the World Trade Center towers fell. Students, firefighters, techies, fishermen and schoolteachers flew with good will and full checkbooks to a city struggling to regain its footing.

"New York has bounced back," said co-organizer Bruce Sampson. "New Orleans hasn't bounced back yet."

Costs for the trip are fluid after a suggested \$200 donation to Mercy Corps. Participants score their own air transportation. Double-occupancy rooms in a French Quarter hotel are \$399 for three nights. Some meals and ground transportation are included.

Mayor Tom Potter, wearing a white sticker announcing "Oregon (hearts) New Orleans," said he'd be there. At first, he said he balked at the timing of the trip, April 1-4, the start of city budget talks. Then Potter recognized the irony.

"We were talking about a city that would love to have that kind of discussion," he said. For more information, visit www.flightoffriendship.com

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