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## Irwin Redlener, M.D.: Fighting for Survival: Sustainability in the Gulf

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**F**ive years after Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans, assessing the progress of recovery from this complex, massive disaster remains fraught with contradictions and conflicting conclusions. Random conversations with business owners, politicians, community leaders, and artists range from outright despair to unbridled optimism, and every nuanced perspective in between.

In fact, many neighborhoods and a slew of new businesses are coming back to life. And a \$1.8 billion dollar federal grant for upgrading New Orleans schools, in large measure secured through the sustained leadership of Louisiana's senior senator, Mary Landrieu, along with governor Bobby Jindal, will be a game changer. Tulane and other local universities are seeing a major surge of applicants. And New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu is on a roll. Among other items on his considerable and multi-dimensional «to-do» list, the mayor has focused successfully on creating an unprecedented network of neighborhood health clinics, a critical development for a city that had never before had a sufficient health care system, especially for low income communities.

But there is another side to the story. Of immediate concern are the day-to-day realities of a local economy that has been struggling: hit once by Katrina, again by a very difficult recovery process and yet again by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Many local business owners are struggling and pessimistic about the prospects for economic recovery. Homelessness is on the rise and many neighborhoods remain blighted.

Still the passion for the recovery and resurgence of New Orleans is remarkable. Recently, Harry

Connick, Jr., one of New Orleans' best known celebrities, appeared on television saying that while people concerned about the long-term viability of the city's «have some logic,» the passion of the city's most ardent rebirth proponents will prevail. We deeply hope so. But important as it is to return rapidly to a sense of «normalcy» in the culture and functionality of the city, the long-term survival of New Orleans will take more than new schools, health care clinics, music and cheerleading.

It is essential that policy makers, community leaders and citizens get a grip on the persistent and growing challenges facing the region. The fact is that it is now or never for confronting the most important existential threats to the survival of New Orleans, of the U.S. Gulf coast generally and of many nations in the Caribbean basin and Central America. A series of 21st century challenges face citizens and political leaders with greater immediacy than most people realize: accelerated climate change, coastal erosion and subsidence (literally, a sinking of the land), and massive pollution.

At a meeting called «Fighting for Survival,» held in New Orleans last August, scientists and political leaders gathered to discuss long-range planning for the future stability and resiliency of the region. It was Senator Landrieu who most succinctly articulated a theme for going forward. She called upon conference participants to think about the notion of «smart growth and sustainability.» In other words, rebuild - but rebuild better than existed prior to the disasters of 2005. Make the economy stronger, the neighborhoods more livable and the culture even more vibrant, and be aware of the potential for disaster if risks are left unattended.

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Most importantly, serious attention and remediation must be focused on the larger forces which, if unchecked, could mean the end of New Orleans, massive changes to the coastline of the Gulf Coast and devastating consequences throughout the Caribbean basin. In the oil-and-gas economy of the Gulf, it's easy to pretend that human-induced climate change is a hoax. But those who would defend the region's economy by denying climate change are actually accelerating the demise of the region. The risks are real, science-based, and undeniable.

The challenge is not just for the Gulf region and the Caribbean economies. The recovery and sustainability of the Gulf Coast is a matter of economic, energy, and security significance for the entire country and indeed for the entire hemisphere. Success will require honesty, science, and persistent national focus and resources.

Doing what needs to get done to avert a major, unimaginable dislocation for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast will not be easy or inexpensive. But if this city is to survive for the children and grandchildren of our nation, we have little choice but to control the forces of climate change and environmental destruction that, if unchecked, may mean the devastation of a region of remarkable beauty, economic importance, and cultural uniqueness.

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