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Le Grand Executif: Hines is 'walking 30-second commercial'

by Terry O'Connor
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Bill Hines compares New Orleans to a poorly managed company.

"I really think New Orleans is unique," Hines said. "Yet we have not had a business plan and properly employed our assets for at least the last two decades. The truth is we probably never have properly employed our assets."

The 47-year-old New Orleans native is old enough to remember when the Crescent City actually had the upper hand economically against regional rivals such as Atlanta and Houston.

"Since I returned home in 1982, we've been on a downward spiral," Hines said. "When I left New Orleans to go to Princeton in 1974, we were larger than Houston or Atlanta. By the time I came back they were larger than us."

Dan Packer, president of Entergy New Orleans, said Hines is now working as hard or harder than anyone in the community to help stir the economic pot.

"He highlights the idea of us doing more in economic development every chance he gets," Packer said. "He's a walking 30-second commercial for economic development in New Orleans."

Packer said Hines and others like him must help Mark Drennen succeed in his new post as president and chief executive of Greater New Orleans Inc.

"There are just some dragons out there that the volunteer leadership needs to take on so Mark can get some jobs in here," Packer said.

Hines said New Orleans must quit squandering its assets.

"I'll use the phrase 'bad management,' which is what's wrong with the 'company,'" Hines said. "I'd love to say it's our elected officials. I don't think that's fair. We've had real problems with elected officials in terms of certain state and local problems with corruption and all that. But I think it's largely to the blame of all of us."

Hines makes it clear he views Mayor C. Ray Nagin as a key part of the solution and not in any way part of the problem. He praises Nagin for sacrificing his six-figure corporate income at Cox Communications to run the city, a sacrifice he says dwarfs his own considerable civic contributions. He hopes others follow the mayor's lead.



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"If we had had our best and brightest busting their tails for 20 years and we were where we are right now, I would tell you I had some serious concerns," Hines said. "But we haven't."

New Orleans has serious image problems, Hines said, stemming from crime, education, pollution and a perceived lax work ethic. He said those image concerns must be addressed for New Orleans to be taken seriously by developers and business-site relocators.

"It's always been my view to work hard and play hard," Hines said. "That's New Orleans. New Orleans has been unfairly labeled as just play hard."

Hines, Drennen, Packer and Nagin all agree the economic development clusters are key to regenerating New Orleans' economy. The 11 clusters include: arts and entertainment, biotechnology, food processing, health care, tourism, technology, maritime, energy, petrochemical, sports and military.

"You just have to do it," Hines said. "And you have to sell it and sell it hard. Occasionally we're going to lose. But we're going to try. And we haven't done that before."

- Terry O'Connor

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