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August 16, 2006

An Open Letter to all ISRI Convention Attendees

Dear Friends:

On July 19th, I traveled with my husband Frank, ISRI Convention Chair Kendig Kneen, and ISRI staff to New Orleans, the site of the 2007 convention. Because of the news media's depiction of clean-up and reconstruction of New Orleans being consistently dismal, I was not looking forward to the site visit. So when ISRI staff assured me that I would be pleasantly surprised, I remained very skeptical.

Well, I was more than pleasantly surprised, I was amazed.

The trip from the airport to the Sheraton Hotel showed a clean and busy city with highway construction not unlike any other major city in our great country. Upon arrival to the hotel, I saw absolutely nothing that would hint to the fact that a hurricane had passed through the area.

The founding fathers of New Orleans knew what they were doing when they built the original settlement, now known as the French Quarter, on higher ground. The French Quarter received very little damage from the hurricane and was untouched by the floods. There was some roof damage due to high winds and the same is true for some of the hotels that we will be using during our stay. But, from what I saw, it appears that all damage has been repaired. Also, although no damage was done to the sidewalks in the area, the city has taken the opportunity to install beautiful slate sidewalks throughout the area and it looks great!

Canal Street and French Quarter shops are open. The business district and warehouse area are bustling since little damage was sustained to this area. The superdome has a brand new roof, and Saints season tickets are sold out. The convention center has had a face-lift and looks amazing. And speaking of the convention center, wait until you taste the food the chef is preparing for us. I dare say it rivals any 5-Star hotel.

The garden district, antique stores and restaurants are open. And according to the Convention and Visitors Bureau, the University Hospital and Tulane Hospital are operating and will be completely open by the time we arrive. These are facilities that we would be using if the need arose.

The only area of the city that was off limits to us was the Lower 9th Ward. There is still devastation to the area. This is the area that the news media and Hollywood actors tell their stories from. It is too bad they never tell you or show you for that matter, all the positively great things that are happening all over the city.

A tour through the Lakeview area of the city – the middle class neighborhood that was hit equally as hard as the Lower 9th Ward – showed some homes already restored and a lot of homes with construction underway.

Both Lakeview and the 9th Ward are a considerable distance from any place we will be visiting (though ISRI does hope to provide tours for those of us who would like to see the areas that were hard hit), so it poses absolutely no problems for us. Overall, the city is much cleaner than I have ever seen it.

On a personal note, I must say I was one of those people that was of the mind to "not rebuild" the area of the city devastated by Katrina. I have since changed my mind. Touring the city has given me a totally new perspective. I never fully appreciated the history and beauty of the city. Unfortunately, it took Katrina to make me realize how very special a place New Orleans is, and how important it is to get the "real news story" of the city to as many people as possible. To lose the city to sensationalism in journalism for a "good story" would be shameful.

I came to New Orleans as a skeptic. I left not only reassured, but excited about returning to the city. If you have the opportunity to visit before our convention, please do. A visit will not only reassure you that New Orleans is coming back, it will help rebuild the city's vital tourist industry.

If not before, let me encourage you to join Frank and me in New Orleans next April for ISRI's Convention and Exposition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jo Cozzi', with a large, stylized flourish at the beginning.

Jo Cozzi