

In Chicago, wishing for a Hurricane Katrina



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Envy isn't a rational response to the upcoming 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

But with Aug. 29 fast approaching and New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu making media rounds, including at the Tribune Editorial Board, I find myself wishing for a storm in Chicago — an unpredictable, haughty, devastating swirl of fury. A dramatic levee break. Geysers bursting through manhole covers. A sleeping city, forced onto the rooftops.

That's what it took to hit the reset button in New Orleans. Chaos. Tragedy. Heartbreak.

Residents overthrew a corrupt government. A new mayor slashed the city budget, forced unpaid furloughs, cut positions, detonated labor contracts. New Orleans' City Hall got leaner and more efficient. Dilapidated buildings were torn down. Public housing got rebuilt. Governments were consolidated.

An underperforming public school system saw a complete makeover. A new schools chief, Paul Vallas, designed a school system with the flexibility of an entrepreneur. No restrictive mandates from the city or the state. No demands from teacher unions to abide. Instead, he created the nation's first free-market education system.

Hurricane Katrina gave a great American city a rebirth.

And after careful study of the levees, it turns out the devastation was not born of natural disaster. It was man-made.

The same could be said of Chicago.

This weekend is the Chicago Air & Water Show. Thousands of people will stream to Chicago's lakefront to marvel at the city and its offerings. All five senses, satiated. Visitors will clamp their palms on their ears to tame the vibration. They will gasp at the stunning skyline. They will taste the sand-swept breeze. They will feel the sun's touch. They will smell the engine fuel.

They will delight.

Chicago is so good at hiding its rot.

Beneath the pretty surface, Chicago faces financial challenges that threaten its future. Decades of overspending and borrowing — practices that continue even as the city and its school system face consistent downgrades in the bond market — tear at its very stability. It is the gravest issue. More than crime. More than education. More than poverty.

You'd never know it by the casual approach of government, both at City Hall and Chicago Public Schools, toward spiraling debt, and our elected officials' continued practice of the risks that got us here.

Forrest Claypool just took over CPS. You can hardly blame him for the ruinous, junk-bond status of the district's finances. Yet he defends the latest CPS budget, which relies on borrowing against borrowing and a bailout from dead-broke Springfield, to appear balanced on paper. He admits it's a budget to buy time. As if we have it.

Lately, every time public officials talk about their budget solutions, it feels like a scene from "Glengarry Glen Ross." Desperate, sweaty and deceitful.

At City Hall, nothing much has changed under four years of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. The candidate in 2011 who promised to make tough decisions on city finances has followed many of the risky practices of his predecessor. The city continues to pass budgets that are unbalanced and rely on borrowing, temporary revenue sources, gimmicky fee hikes and tax increment finance sweeps.

The city borrowed \$900 million last year. Another \$1.1 billion in June. Emanuel is planning on borrowing yet another \$500 million currently. All of the borrowing kicks the can down the road, costs taxpayers hundreds of millions more in interest payments and jeopardizes other worthy programs, under the guise of what? Protecting middle-class taxpayers from a big hit? No, they're lining us up for a firing squad.

In June, just a month after new City Council members took their seats, only one freshman voted against the borrowing. One.

Ald. Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, 35th, said he could not in good conscience vote for more borrowing when the city has no long-term plan to correct its financial spiral. Every other candidate who campaigned on not being a rubber stamp to Emanuel, on taking a hard look at the city's books, on refusing to vote on something shoved under their noses at the last minute — they went right along with the mayor's borrowing plan. There was not even debate on the council floor.

Only two incumbents voted against the June borrowing: Ald. Scott Waguespack, 32nd, and Ald. John Arena, 45th.

So if you think somehow new leadership is going to right the ship, you might want to get your head checked. There is no sense of urgency about the city's or the schools' perpetual abyss. Not under Emanuel. Not with a new City Council. Not with a new board at CPS.

That's why I find myself praying for a real storm. It's why I can relate, metaphorically, to the residents of New Orleans climbing onto their rooftops and begging for help and waving their arms and lurching toward rescue helicopters.

Except here, no one responds to the SOS messages painted boldly in the sky. Instead, they double down on their own man-made disaster.

Kristen McQueary is a member of the Tribune Editorial Board.

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