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## **NEW ORLEANS & COMPANY ANNOUNCES CEO TRANSITION AFTER 20 YEARS**

*J. Stephen Perry, CEO since 2002, to retire next year; Board votes Walt Leger III as Perry's successor to lead New Orleans' cultural economy and \$10 billion tourism industry*

**NEW ORLEANS – December 16, 2021** – Prominent national tourism executive and long-time leader of New Orleans' largest private industry, J. Stephen Perry, President and CEO of New Orleans & Company since 2002, has announced his retirement from public and private service effective December 31, 2022. Today, the private membership and trade organization's Board of Directors voted on a succession plan that appoints Walter "Walt" J. Leger III, attorney, former state legislator and New Orleans & Company's EVP/General Counsel as President-Elect and Perry's successor effective January 1, 2023.

New Orleans & Company is the tourism and hospitality industry's official destination sales, marketing and trade organization, responsible for driving over \$10 billion of annual business to the regional cultural economy and attracting leisure and cultural travel, business meetings, conventions, weddings, festivals, sporting, and special events to New Orleans in a highly competitive global environment. It has 1,100 dues-paying members.

Perry took the helm of New Orleans & Company, formerly known as the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB), in August 2002 when the travel industry was still reeling from the 9/11 terror attacks. He led the city's most important industry through unprecedented crises such as Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, Hurricane Ida and the current COVID pandemic. Perry led the renaming and rebranding of the CVB to New Orleans & Company and created and implemented a unique private sector funding model that is envied among his peers.

However, Perry's contributions to New Orleans' cultural economy date back to 1996 when he began service as Chief of Staff to the late Governor Mike Foster for almost seven years, thought to be the longest serving chief of staff in Louisiana history. In that role, Perry was the primary driver of Louisiana's 2001 negotiations for the financial stability and long-term retention of the New Orleans Saints which proved critical during the Katrina recovery. Perry also was the lead negotiator for the state on the recruitment and relocation of the Charlotte Hornets to become the New Orleans Hornets, now the Pelicans. He played an instrumental role in the building efforts of the Smoothie King Center, phase three of the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA), and the PGA Tournament Players Club, home to the PGA Tour's Zurich Classic. Perry was highly regarded as the state's leading higher education advocate during his tenure, as the Foster administration allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to higher education funding, buildings and infrastructure.

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Governor Foster and his senior team led by Perry fought for and passed strong accountability reform, high stakes testing in schools, significant tort reform for business, the TOPs program providing free college tuition for a broad swath of Louisiana high school students, large pay raises for school teachers and university professors, and created the state's first Community and Technical College system.

Perry was also a key part of the small working group charged with bringing Harrah's out of bankruptcy, getting the building built and creating an operational statutory working model so the state's only land-based casino could open and prosper.

While at New Orleans & Company, Perry advocated for New Orleans on the national stage:

- In 2005, he personally hosted President George W. Bush in the CVB office building to convey the region's tourism industry needs post-Katrina.
- Perry was tapped by the Bush Administration to serve on the national U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board and was one of only two members reappointed by the Obama administration to serve two additional terms.
- Perry served many years on the board and was elected as Chairman of Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI), the international governing body of destination marketing organizations (DMOs), dedicated to advancing best practices for 2,800 professionals from 650 DMOs in 30 countries.
- Perry currently serves on the board of and was a long-time member of the executive committee of the U.S. Travel Association, the national, non-profit organization representing all components of the travel industry. U.S. Travel's mission is to increase travel to and within the United States.

Over the course of his career, Perry has served on the boards of the Audubon Nature Institute, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and served for over a decade on the Board of Supervisors of LSU including a term as board chairman. He co-chaired the searches resulting in the hiring of Coach Ed Orgeron in football and Will Wade in basketball. Perry was frequently teased in business circles for his eclectic academic background in Russian and French area studies, languages, literature, and philosophy, his master's degree from LSU in anthropology and his early years as a professional archaeologist.

"I have had a lifelong love affair with the city of New Orleans," said Stephen Perry. "The entirety of my professional life has focused on my love of higher education and my love of the culture of New Orleans. Fortunately, the governor gave me his full blessing on leading massive investments in the New Orleans cultural economy and in the difficult negotiations to earn our place as the smallest city in America to have two major sports franchises. Louisiana is my heart, but New Orleans is my soul. Leading New Orleans & Company for two decades was the greatest honor and privilege ever and I can never thank my colleagues, industry and board enough for the thrill and honor of being their partner for so many years."

David Bilbe, New Orleans & Company's 2021 Chairman and General Manager of the Omni Royal Orleans Hotel, said, "Many people think tourism dollars just happen, but it actually must be fought for and earned, and that is the role of New Orleans & Company. Under Stephen's leadership, the city achieved record-breaking visitor levels, won Super Bowl, Final Four and NBA All Star games bids, created tens of thousands of jobs and careers in hospitality, secured critical recovery investments and won multiple national and international awards."

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Bilbe continued, “We salute Stephen and have every confidence that Walt will continue and build upon the extraordinary efforts of Stephen. The future for our cultural economy is very bright with Walt’s future leadership.”

Stan Harris, President and CEO of the Louisiana Restaurant Association and 2022 Chairman of New Orleans & Company added, “Walt is a New Orleanian through and through, he has worked closely with Stephen and been completely integrated in all aspects of the company’s sales, marketing, advocacy, budgeting, and crisis management for the past two years. The Board believes Walt’s knowledge of government, business, and our culture and his innate ability to meet people where they are makes him an outstanding selection and well-situated to represent our industry to decision makers across the nation and the world.

His leadership throughout the pandemic has been essential to supporting our sales and marketing efforts as we have collaborated with customers to re-negotiate bookings and develop strategies to safely move forward with their planned events. Walt is uniquely qualified to take the reins at this crucial time. The board feels confident in moving forward with our succession plan to ensure stability as we emerge from such a challenging time.”

Roger Dow, President of the U.S. Travel Association said, “Stephen Perry was one of the elite, highly innovative DMO (destination marketing organization) presidents in America. He helped originate and build many of our national initiatives like advocacy, PAC work, our Meetings Mean Business coalition and international tourism growth and created a national model funding structure for DMOs. He was a deeply respected national voice and a credit to New Orleans. I and my team have had the tremendous pleasure of working with Walt Leger over the past two years and applaud his selection as Steve’s successor ... a home run for New Orleans. Walt is one of the smartest, most polished new figures on the national tourism scene in years and has an unlimited future.”

Walt Leger added, “I am honored by the confidence the Board has placed in me and I salute Stephen’s singular achievements that have led to record breaking success over the past two decades. Only through innovation, creativity and a steadfast commitment to our members and the people of New Orleans can we hope to build upon the many successes our city has seen over the years. I look forward to the challenges that lay ahead, and I pledge that no destination anywhere will out work our team at New Orleans & Company to ensure that New Orleans remains a world-class destination with a thriving cultural economy and an improving quality of life for our residents.”

Prior to joining New Orleans & Company in 2019, Walt practiced law for 16 years ... first as an assistant district attorney in New Orleans and then for 13 years at the law firm of Leger and Shaw as an admiralty and maritime lawyer and civil litigator. Walt also served as Louisiana’s youngest ever Speaker Pro Tempore of the Louisiana House of Representatives. There he represented New Orleans’ District 91, which includes Central City, Uptown, the Lower Garden District, the Irish Channel, parts of Broadmoor, Gert Town, and Hollygrove, from 2008-2020.

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Walt was raised in St. Bernard Parish, where his parents instilled in him the spirit of public service and civic engagement from an early age. He took this spirit with him as he graduated with honors from Jesuit High School and then Louisiana State University. He graduated from Tulane Law School and served as an Assistant District Attorney in New Orleans, specializing in the felony prosecution of violent offenders and narcotics traffickers. Motivated by the desire to serve his community after hurricane Katrina and by a desire to improve the criminal justice system, he once again felt the calling for public service.

Walt was first elected to the Legislature in the fall of 2007 and re-elected without opposition in 2011 and 2015. He was unanimously chosen by his colleagues to serve as the Speaker Pro Tempore of the Louisiana House of Representatives in 2012 and again in 2016, the youngest member to ever hold this position. Walt served 12 years in the house before leaving due to term limits in 2020. During his legislative career, Walt passed over one hundred (100) pieces of legislation and was one of the most prolific and successful members of his generation.

During his legislative career, Walt was named a legislative champion over forty (40) times highlighting his broad agenda to promote educational opportunities for children, reform the criminal justice system, support victims of crime, achieve tax and fiscal reform, improve connectivity and transportation, support economic development, promote affordable housing, and protect and restore our coastline.

Walt's groundbreaking legislative successes include the creation of the Revenue Stabilization Trust Fund, the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund, and the Criminal Justice Reinvestment Program. Walt is committed to making New Orleans and Louisiana a better place to live, especially as he and his wife, Danielle, raise their young daughters, Cate and Caroline.

**\*\* Note to Media: One-on-one interviews with Perry and Leger will be available between 1:30 p.m.-3:00 pm CST on December 16. To schedule, please contact [Kelly Schulz](#) or [Mary Beth Romig](#) via email or call 504-566-5019.**

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