

# *New Orleans Groups Plan Business Conference in Cuba*

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New Orleans, January 23 (RHC-NOLA)-- Following a December agreement between the United States and Cuba to begin normalizing diplomatic relations, two New Orleans-based business groups have initiated their own form of outreach to the Caribbean nation, Nola.com reports.

The International Cuba Society, along with the local organization At the Threshold, announced a partnership Thursday with the University of Havana to host the inaugural Cuba Hoy ("Cuba Today") Conference in Havana.

The March 14th through 21st conference is designed for business executives, lawyers and civic leaders. It is to combine education with cultural and business networking events for U.S. and Cuban citizens.

Romualdo "Romi" Gonzalez, chairman of the International Cuba Society, said the conference has been in the planning stages for eight or nine months, well before President Barack Obama ordered diplomatic relations be restored in December.

During a visit to New Orleans in early April, Cuba's top diplomat to the U.S., Jose Cabañas-Rodriguez, tried to facilitate greater cultural exchange between New Orleans and Cuba, Gonzalez said. The visit persuaded Gonzalez and other local Cuba boosters to begin planning the Cuba Hoy Conference.

"Re-establishing Louisiana's historically strong ties with Cuba could have a huge economic impact on Louisiana, particularly New Orleans," said Joe Doss, president of At The Threshold. "This trip will help position Louisiana as a leader in the engagement process and set the stage for a mutually beneficial relationship."

In addition to offering attendees historic tours of Havana, the conference will feature seminars aimed at educating U.S. businesspeople and residents on several areas of interest. Among them: property and foreign investment, energy development and environmental considerations, and disaster resilience.

The trip itself will be a landmark event, representing the first direct flight from New Orleans to Havana since 1958, Gonzalez said. Participants will travel legally on a chartered plane of Cuba Travel-USA, a licensed travel agent for travel to Cuba based in Metairie.

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