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MISSION

*Providing tools that enable you
to advocate for a functional,
accountable government*

The mission of The Lens is to engage and empower the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by providing the information and analysis necessary to advocate for more accountable and just governance.

With a staff of experienced investigative reporters and pundits, The Lens merges the accuracy, fairness and thoroughness of traditional journalism with the speed, urgency and interactivity of online media. This hybrid model is well-suited to New Orleans, a city where residents count media watchdogs as allies in the struggle to rebuild a better community in the face of limited resources.

Cover Credit:
The Lens Airbnb Tracker

ABOUT

Who we are and what we do

The Lens was founded in 2009, but the seeds of the organization date back to 2005, when the levees collapsed and New Orleans flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In many ways, the recovery of New Orleans was a DIY effort based on the engagement, collaboration and ingenuity of its citizens.

The Lens grew out of that movement, with our commitment to give the people of New Orleans the tools and information needed to watchdog a municipal government dealing with unparalleled challenges and unprecedented amounts of recovery funding.

We focus most closely on New Orleans, in the areas of government accountability, criminal justice, coastal restoration, land use and public education under a school system that, since Katrina, has been rocked by a convulsive reform effort.

That the newspaper industry has fallen into steep decline in the age of the internet has brought added urgency to the new generation of nonprofit online news services willing and able to tackle investigative projects.

Our reporters don't spend all their time on daily news and instead dig into the deeper structures of corruption, injustice, and the mismanagement of public assets. We unpeel stories layer by layer and publish on a rolling basis that both informs the public and allows points of entry for citizens who can provide the insights, tips and corroboration.

It makes our job no easier, but we are not afraid to challenge elected officials and community leaders if searching for and speaking truth requires it. We measure success by our proven ability to shape public debate and drive policy changes.

LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

Life at a news operation like The Lens is as fast-paced as it is financially precarious. Friends and colleagues sometimes ask me where I find the energy to keep going year after year. Indeed, as we near the end of a decade of reporting, I sometimes ask myself!

But the answer is right there in front of me every time I visit the site. It's there in the astonishingly skillful and impactful work of our reporters and editors; it's there in the daily ebb and flow of our audience metrics as readers — and public officials — dig into our journalism and respond to it. It's there in the continuing generosity of the foundations and private donors who support independent, nonprofit journalism at a time of grave threats to American democracy.

The year was marked with an administrative shakeup here at The Lens, bringing fresh challenges and exhilarating opportunities. In a disagreement over financing strategies, our board parted ways with longtime Lens CEO Steve Beatty and welcomed former board chairman Nick Peddle as interim executive director.

On the editorial side, we continued to explore potent collaborations with national media partners as a way to broaden our readership — and our donor base — beyond the in-town audience most acutely attentive, as we are, to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. We interacted with leaders and the general public at forums and breakfasts; we hosted visitors from Ukraine and introduced them to the mysteries of our (almost) “free press.” We made plans for an internship program for young, minority journalists, one that will diversify our newsroom as it accelerates their professional educations.

We won prizes for our work. We jolted embarrassed government agencies (from school boards to criminal prosecutors) into policy changes stemming from patterns of injustice and mismanagement we uncovered.

At a time when daily newspapers are in decline and social media have proved themselves so vulnerable to the promulgation of bigotry and fake news, we are more than ever committed to the mission that we have sustained — and that has sustained us — for a full decade: providing an engaged citizenry with the tools needed to demand accountable governance at every level.

With your support, in league with all of us who believe in New Orleans and the critical importance of truth-telling within a vibrant democracy, we're gearing up for the next decade. The work is hard and the pace is grueling, but we wouldn't have it any other way. Thanks in advance for continuing to make it possible.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen T. Gadbois". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'K' and 'G'.

Karen Gadbois
Founder of The Lens

REPORTING

The biggest stories of the year.

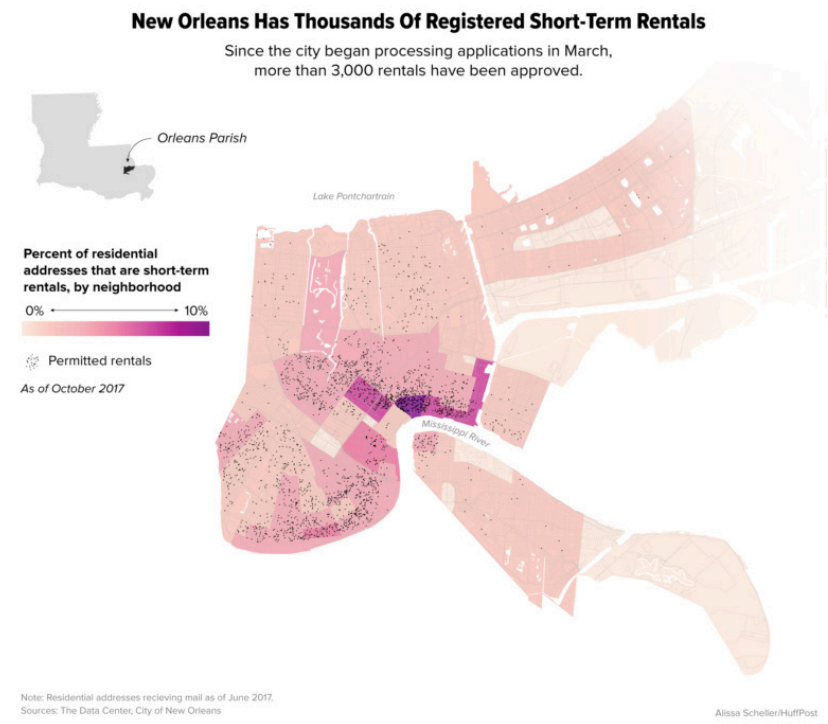


Investigating lead in New Orleans school water

One of our most important stories in 2017 came about because education reporter Marta Jewson followed up on an announcement made in the wake of the Flint, Michigan, lead poisoning. In 2016, the two school districts that oversee most New Orleans schools said they would test schools’ water for lead. But we hadn’t heard anything further.

Through public records, we learned the school systems [had dropped their plans to test water](#) after the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans raised a [number of questions about the plan](#). Employees with the water agency argued that schools should allow for a higher level of lead in the water and said they wanted to conduct their own tests. The schools’ consultant worried they’d have problems with dueling test results, so the plans were scrapped.

Instead, school system officials decided to install filters, which should make the water safe regardless of the lead level. But as of early 2018, [the filters still haven’t been installed](#). And no one has tested the water.



Airbnb in New Orleans

Short-term rentals were illegal (but not uncommon) in New Orleans for decades. But in late 2016, with Airbnbs sprouting up all over, the City Council decided to legalize and regulate home-sharing through platforms like Airbnb and VRBO.

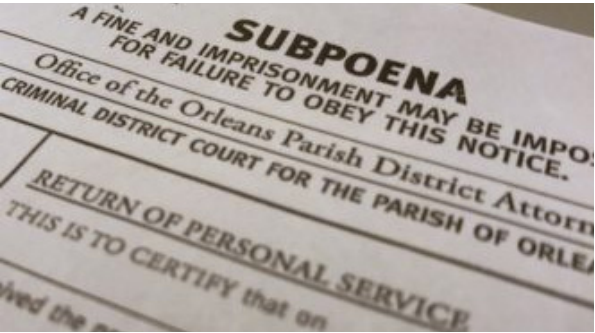
The law went into effect in April 2017. Applications for licenses came rolling in, and, using city data, [The Lens started mapping them](#). The Airbnb tracker has become one of our most popular features; it laid the groundwork for our ongoing reporting as well as for increasingly vociferous community debate.



In the fall of 2017, The Lens partnered with HuffPost on an [investigation of short-term rentals in New Orleans](#). We spoke to interest groups on both sides, Airbnb operators and people whose residential blocks had become tourist districts. We found that in one neighborhood, one in 10 residential addresses were licensed as Airbnbs. The hottest neighborhoods on Airbnb had become richer and whiter than the city as a whole, bolstering opponents’ argument that short-term rentals contribute to gentrification and displacement.

Later, we reported on several residents who had been [kicked out of their homes](#) so their landlords could turn them into short-term rentals.

Airbnb became an issue in the city’s 2017 elections. Incoming mayor LaToya Cantrell, who had expressed some skepticism about the negative effects of short-term rentals, has since [called for a comprehensive study](#) of the law. Cantrell also proposed the first [legislative action to limit commercial short-term rentals](#) in some neighborhoods. The Lens has shown such rentals are cropping up beyond the city’s commercial core, and some people have tried to get their properties rezoned to take advantage of more lenient rules.



Investigative Reporters & Editors recognized The Lens’ outstanding investigation into fake subpoenas.

Fake subpoenas

Last spring, The Lens revealed that prosecutors at the Orleans Parish District Attorney’s Office pressured witnesses to cooperate by issuing subpoenas that hadn’t been authorized by a judge. The notices ordered witnesses and crime victims to appear for private interviews with prosecutors. They threatened imprisonment and fines for failing to obey. But they [were fake](#) — a bullying tactic, not a legal one.

For years, prosecutors in New Orleans used these phony documents to make reluctant witnesses cooperate. The day we revealed the practice, the DA’s office stopped.

We soon learned prosecutors in [other parishes](#) employed similar tactics. They, too, immediately stopped.

Over the months that followed, Lens reporter Charles Maldonado continued to investigate, despite the [DA’s refusal to turn over public records](#) on this practice. We mailed thousands of postcards seeking people who had been on the receiving end of fake subpoenas. We passed out flyers at corner stores and in front of the courthouse at Tulane and Broad. We appeared on radio, TV and at community meetings.

Ultimately, we published about 25 stories on fake subpoenas in 2017, an effort unmatched by any other news outlet in the city. DA Leon Cannizzaro claimed no one had been penalized for failing to obey one of these notices, but we found a case in which prosecutors [sought and obtained an arrest warrant](#) for a witness. They sent one to a [child molestation victim](#). And in the late 1990s, a prosecutor who is now a sitting judge [used misleading subpoenas](#).

What’s more, several judges had been [warned about the practice over the years](#).

Our reporting has led to three public records lawsuits against the DA’s office (including [one filed by The Lens](#)), an [ethics investigation](#) by the state Office of Disciplinary Counsel, a [criminal complaint filed with the Louisiana Attorney General](#), and a [sweeping, federal civil rights suit](#) by the ACLU and the Civil Rights Corps. Our series received a first-place award from Investigative Reporters and Editors.



National partnerships

Since our first major collaboration with a national outlet — our 2014 “[Losing Ground](#)” partnership with ProPublica — we continue to work with prominent organizations to raise the profile of issues affecting New Orleans and Louisiana.

In 2017, we worked with Weather.com on its “United States of Climate Change” project, which described how the warming planet is changing each state in the country. [Our story looked at Port Fourchon](#), a vital oil and gas hub that is connected to the rest of the country by a ribbon of asphalt stretching across disappearing wetlands.

Earlier in the year, we worked with the Food and Environment Reporting Network and the Gravy podcast to show how [Native Americans living on the edge of Louisiana are trying to rebuild their ability to feed themselves](#) while the land around them crumbles. This multimedia story showed what has been lost already and how these people are trying to shape their future. We followed this with an in-person event at which Lens readers could talk to journalists and people from those communities.

REPORTING

The biggest stories of the year.

Traffic cameras

In 2017, with the City Council's approval, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu moved to double the size of the city's traffic-camera enforcement program — the robotic system that issues tickets to drivers for speeding and running red lights. Though that program brings in millions of dollars to the city each year, the mayor said the expansion was about safety, not money. But what proof did he have that the cameras made our roads safer?



None, [it turned out](#). The Lens' public-records requests and inquiries to City Hall turned up no data comparing road safety before and after the cameras were installed. And the city's contractor, which made millions of dollars from the cameras, had not lived up to the terms of its contract by studying traffic conditions and wrecks for proposed camera locations.

We learned later that as we were reporting this story, the city embarked on just the sort of study we were asking about. It was released in the summer of 2017 and [showed a connection between camera locations and fewer crashes](#).

Holding government accountable

The Lens held City Hall to its promises and its obligations in 2017. Late in the year, we finally settled a lawsuit [forcing Mayor Mitch Landrieu's administration](#) to hand over the city's purchasing database. The Lens had sought the database since 2015. It's already helped us in our ongoing reporting.

We also continued our series on the city's spotty school-zone lights. Since 2015, we've periodically sent reporters to every school zone in the city to find out which ones work. The first time, just [two out of five were flashing](#) when they should have been. In May 2017, we saw a turnaround: [four out of five worked properly](#). The improvement coincided with the expansion of the city's traffic cameras.



Some motorists in Louisiana receive a flyer in the mail after they get a ticket, allowing them to take an online course and pay a fee in exchange for having the ticket dropped. Local district attorneys can keep the money raised by these traffic diversion programs, but one has decided to share some of the money with the local public defender.

Prosecutors offer drivers a deal to drop speeding tickets

More and more, [Louisiana drivers ticketed for speeding are offered a deal](#): Write the local district attorney a check, and prosecutors will drop the ticket. The Lens revealed this practice in 2017, shedding light on the growing practice and the financial incentives behind it.

As more tickets were diverted, fewer went to court. That meant criminal justice agencies that relied on court costs for much of their funding, such as public defenders, saw their revenues drop. Meanwhile, district attorneys could pocket all of the money.

After we reported the story, we learned that one of the district attorneys [had started to share some of his revenue](#) from diverted tickets.

Charter school accountability

New Orleans is a center of education reform, with almost all public schools operating as independent charters. For years, The Lens has kept an eye on how they spend taxpayer dollars and how they teach our children.

We focus on issues related to education access, ranging from how students get into schools to how they're treated in the classroom. Schools have gotten into trouble for [not serving students who need extra help](#), making it [tough for children to enroll](#), failing to provide [busing](#), keeping [homeless students out of class](#), mishandling [mental health issues like depression](#), and, on one occasion, [handcuffing a 9-year-old boy](#). We broke many of these stories and followed them to make sure offending schools were held accountable.

After state scores for New Orleans schools dropped in 2017, we examined prior years and reported that [test scores at most schools were on a three-year slide](#).

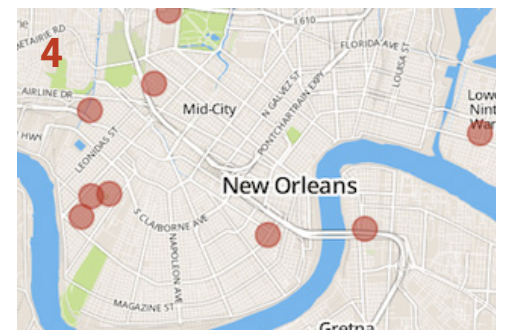
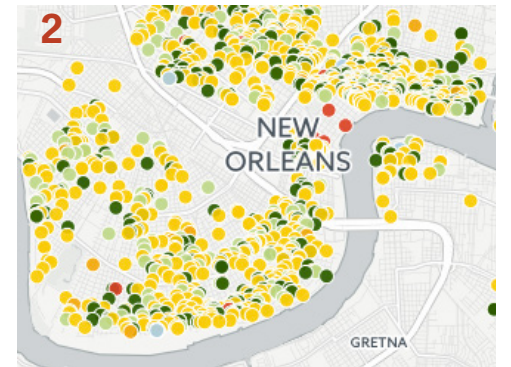
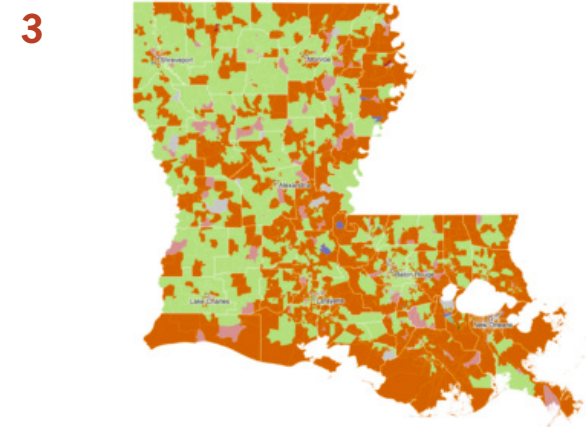
We track stories that take years to develop, such as [nepotism cases against two charter school leaders](#). (One of those cases started after we revealed in 2013 that a charter organization employed several relatives of the CEO.)

The state has issued warnings to charter schools after [we reported on violations of the Open Meetings Law](#). We scour audits and reports for possible stories, including one in which we revealed that a [charter board member resigned](#) because his company had done business with the charter organization, an act of self-enrichment that appeared to violate ethics laws.

OPINIONS AND DATA

A forum for thoughtful, informed commentary

Our Opinion section continued to serve as a vigorous forum for city-wide dialogue and debate. Seasoned community leaders contributed; but we were just as pleased to welcome first-time columnists eager to collaborate with professional editors in shaping and sharpening their viewpoints. That brought fresh voices — and readers — to The Lens. It also enabled us to touch on events and controversies that fell outside the parameters of our staffed reportage. Some columns were hotly contentious. We took a deep breath and published anyway, then gave the soapbox to rebuttalists, including some who attacked us for giving voice to their opponents in the first place. We drew the line at expressions of racism and other forms of obscenity, but bent over backwards to expose readers to as wide a spectrum of responsible opinion as we could find writers to generate.



(1) The Vault (2) Airbnb tracker (3) Election map (4) Property sales tracker

Data

Shining a bright light: An online resource we pioneered and call [The Vault](#) remained the go-to site for people seeking data on everything from Airbnb rentals to election returns to city contracts, every last one of them, large or small. Predictably, City Hall has sometimes resisted our effort to provide readers with tools that allows close scrutiny of municipal governance. It took two years and a lawsuit to obtain the city's database of vendors and spending. But the cash nexus is not our only interest. We are the only news outlet in the state that publishes live, precinct-level election maps.

MOST READ

Our 10 most heavily read features in 2017, in descending order:

1. [Orleans Parish prosecutors are using fake subpoenas to pressure witnesses to talk to them](#)
2. [How Airbnb is pushing locals out of New Orleans' coolest neighborhoods](#)
3. [New Orleans Airbnb tracker](#)
4. [Time to recognize the basic flaw in our whole approach to flood prevention \(column\)](#)
5. [Live election map: New Orleans mayor and City Council, Oct. 14 primary](#)
6. [Here's a FEMA flood-risk map that actually delivers good news for New Orleans \(from 2016\)](#)
7. [Short-term rentals create a long-term problem: soaring taxes for the rest of us \(column\)](#)
8. [Here's a map of everyone in New Orleans who has applied so far for a license to rent their home on Airbnb](#)
9. [Louisiana DA's offer motorists a deal: Write us a check and we'll dismiss your speeding ticket](#)
10. [Coastal flooding may force thousands of homes in Louisiana to be elevated or bought out](#)

2017 AWARDS

The Lens received 7 awards



Investigative Reporters & Editors recognized The Lens' outstanding investigation (print/online category) into fake subpoenas.

The Lens' investigation into fake subpoenas was recognized as being among the best in investigative journalism, winning a national Investigative Reporters and Editors award. Last spring, we revealed that local prosecutors were using fake subpoenas to pressure reluctant crime victims and witnesses. The practice was halted immediately. "In a category packed with outstanding entries, The Lens' series on fake subpoenas stood out," the judges wrote.



- The Press Club of New Orleans honored Lens reporters Marta Jewson and Charles Maldonado for their reporting on charter schools and local government. Jewson also won the Alex Waller Memorial Award, which recognizes the best among all writing award-winners.

The stories that received top honors are good examples of the in-depth, public-interest reporting that The Lens specializes in. They dealt with important matters of government accountability: a charter school board's private discussions about a teachers' union drive and overpayments to local sheriff's deputies. The Lens was the only news outlet to report these stories, and we stuck with them.
- Jewson won first-place in the investigative category for her stories about how the board governing [Lusher Charter School sidestepped the state's Open Meetings Law when dealing with a teachers' union drive](#).
- Maldonado won first place in the continuing coverage category for his stories [about Orleans Parish sheriff's deputies who received extra pay](#) that they weren't supposed to get. A former deputy filed a complaint with the Louisiana Legislative Auditor, which concluded that Sheriff Marlin Gusman [appeared to have overpaid his deputies \\$1 million](#).
- Former Lens reporter Bob Marshall received second and third place in the environmental/science category for his [coverage of coastal restoration](#) and [urban water management](#).

2018 WHAT TO LOOK FORWARD TO

The beauty and challenge of news gathering and investigative analysis is to remain alert to unpredictable developments. Stuff happens. But some major vectors in our reporting for 2018 can be foreseen. One is an investigation into childhood lead poisoning in the New Orleans area: where it's happening and what's being done about this urgent, long-neglected public health crisis.

Readers can also look ahead to deepening coverage of New Orleans' school reform effort, including the ways in which New Orleans students are denied their right to a free and appropriate public education. No New Orleans youth should be denied the right to a free and rigorous public education. We will embrace these substantive classroom issues without abandoning our traditionally sharp focus on administrative violations of sunshine laws regarding public access to meetings and government records.

And there is more to report on the prosecutorial misbehavior that we exposed in our coverage of fake subpoenas, our most impactful series of stories over the past year.

Against that backdrop of breaking and ongoing news coverage, we remain committed to educating our readers on how they can best access government and strengthen community. To that end, we look ahead to more of the highly successful Lens forums in which readers and the general public encounter and quiz civic leaders and newsmakers directly. You're invited!

OUR PARTNERS

READER COMMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS

Collaborations with media partners, many national, have extended our reach and bolstered our reputation. These efforts have garnered a number of awards, and some have generated revenue for The Lens.

Our Partners have included:

- [ProPublica](#)
- [The Center for Investigative Reporting \(Reveal\)](#)
- [Weather.com](#)
- [PolitiFact](#)
- [The Nation](#)
- [The Food and Environment Reporting Network](#)
- [Gravy podcast](#)
- [The Advocate](#)
- [WWNO-FM](#)
- [WRBH-FM](#)
- [The Hechinger Report](#)
- [The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange](#)

FOUNDATION SUPPORT


- [Baptist Community Ministries](#)
- [Build Now Foundation](#)
- [Ethics & Excellence in Journalism Foundation](#)
- [Greater New Orleans Foundation](#)
- [Institute for Nonprofit News](#)
- [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#)
- [The Reva & David Logan Foundation](#)
- [Ruth U. Fertel Foundation](#)
- [The Walton Family Foundation](#)



Time 4 Change n LA · 20 Dec 2017

The Lens is the only reader-supported, nonprofit newsroom 4 NOLA&GulfCoastNews!Excellent work!PLz consider donating 🙌

[twitter.com/thelensnola/st...](#)



David Menschel @davidminpdx Feb 16

Replying to @gadboislensnola

Amen. The Lens has been doing a terrific job down in NOLA doing just that. I also recommend @FairPunishment (aka In Justice Today).




skooks @skooks Feb 27

Replying to @skooks

A few years back, The Lens was on the trail Landrieu's opaque and highly questionable process of doling out NOLA for Life funds.

[thelensnola.org/2013/06/25/opa...](#)



Harry Shearer @theha... 28 Aug 2017

"I don't think anybody can vet anybody else's sources." The lady demonstrates her journalistic don'tknowhow.

[amp.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/a...](#)



That Guy @LowerCapeHome 28 Aug 2017

Replying to @theharryshearer

Do we have bonifide journalists anymore?



Harry Shearer @theha... 28 Aug 2017

Replying to @LowerCapeHome


Sure we do.



That Guy @LowerCapeHome 28 Aug 2017

Replying to @theharryshearer

Who do you recommend?



Harry Shearer @theharryshearer

Replying to @LowerCapeHome

Too long a list, actually. Among the many: Charles Maldonado of The Lens NOLA, Bob Marshall at [nola.com](#)....

EVENTS

As reporters we know well that public records are windows into local government. Our two-hour workshops make it possible for participants to mingle and then actively participate in the three-part program, involving [a PowerPoint presentation](#) and the chance to discuss what's been shown and question Lens leaders. Those parts are as follows: We teach people how public records are key to citizen engagement and open government; what public records are and how to get them from local agencies; and specific data sources and tips related to the workshop theme.

Audiences at our public records workshops are generally more diverse than those drawn to our topical events, reflecting the makeup of the city itself. One workshop drew educators, family of current students and members of communities across New Orleans.

A low-income worker may find herself seated with business executives in pinstriped suits, all of them equally interested in learning how to access public records for perhaps very different needs.

One of our goals is to make Lens workshops more accessible to disenfranchised and marginalized communities and to connect with individuals and organizations that we currently support. We are open to holding them in different parts of the city.

2017 BY THE NUMBERS

2017 MEMBERSHIP

323
MEMBERS

Increase of 45 members from 2016

2017 NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION

3,824
SUBSCRIBERS

Increase of 371 subscribers from 2016

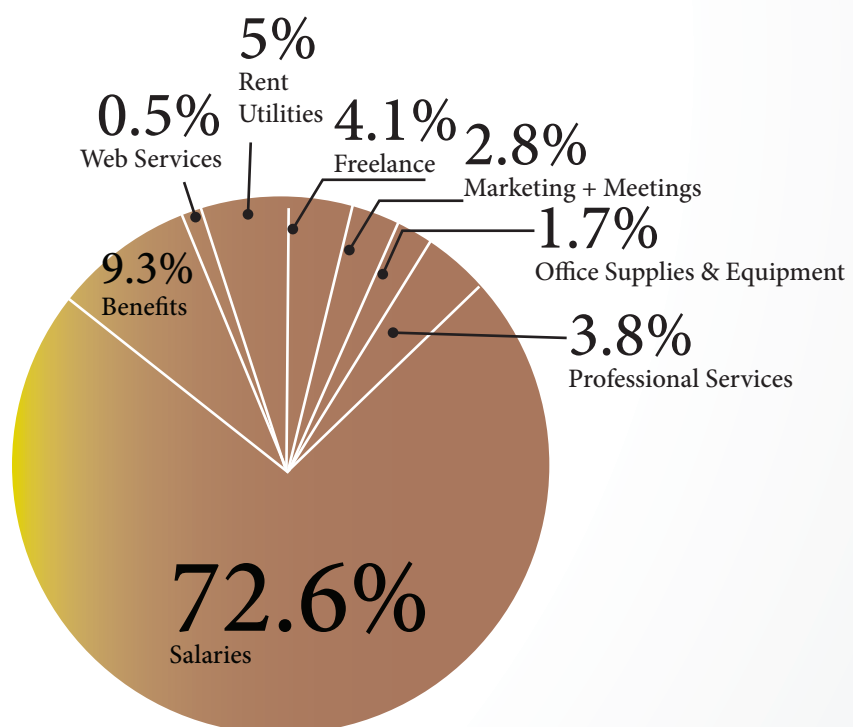
2017 MEMBERSHIP & SMALL DONOR REVENUE

\$81,415

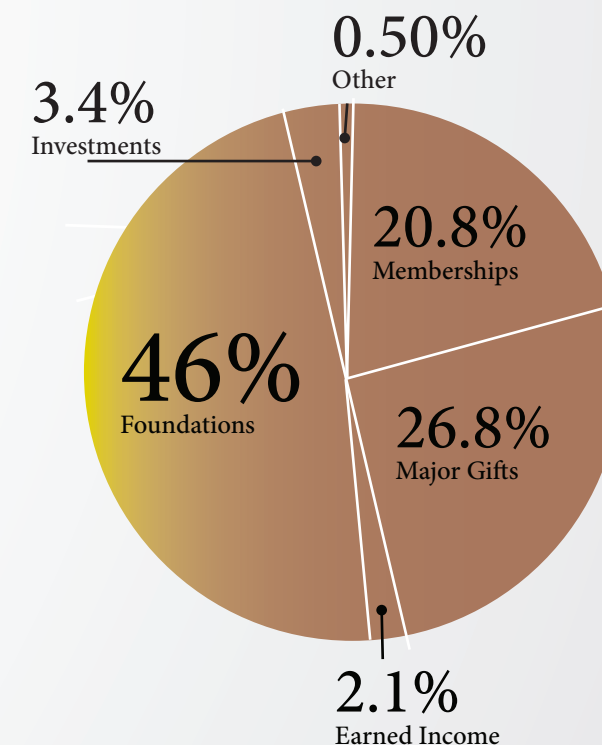
Increase of \$22,784 from 2016

FINANCIALS

2017 Expenses



2017 Revenue



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Jason Alcorn	Chi Chao
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Steven Aucoin	Richard Colton
Melissa Audick	Joseph Constans
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James Ball	Moirá Crone
Karin Barbee	June Cross
Sandra Barbier	Sue Cross
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John Barry	Maryann Cutler Cook
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Georgia Bryant	Scott Eustis
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Colleen Butler	Daniel and Elizabeth
Beth Butler	Falk
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John Carrere	Jane Ferguson
Bess Carrick	Jose Fernandes
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Samantha Carter	Robert Fogarty
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Robert Gardiner	Pam Jewson
Peter Gardner	Wilson Johns
Sonia Gasparini	DaVel Johnson
Kirk Gasperecz	Jane Johnson
Mamie Gasperecz	Marjorie Esman and Jonathan Wallick
Cheryl Gerber	Rachel Jones
Deborah Gillespie	Beaux Jones
David Gillespie	Christine Jordan
LoriAnn Girvan	Cynthia Joyce
Margaret Eileen Gleason	Sandy Juarez
Carol Gniady	Lynnette Judge
Mark Gonzalez	Martha Kegel
Stephanie Grace	Aimee Keife
Della Graham	Laura Kelley
Roberta Gratz	John Kobza
Kath Graythen	Clement Koefler
Kristen Gremillion	Alexander Kolker
Kellie Grengs	Andy Kopplin
Joan Griswold	Kristine Kovach
John Groome	Staci Kramer
Mimi Horner Groome	Hannah Kreiger-Benson
Susan Guidry	Maureen Kroha
Michael Hahn	Margaret Lang
Sue Hall	Jay Lapeyre
Andy Hall / Wisconsin Watch	Julee LaPorte
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Elizabeth Hampton	Dennis LaRock
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Miklos Mendler	Katharine Rathbun
Kevin Mercadel	Wade Rathke
Melanie Merz	Natalie Reaux
Michael Metelits	Mark Reed
Natalie Mitchell	Colin Reingold
Elizabeth Monaghan	Kimberly Reyher
Kathryn Montgomery	Josh Reyher
John Mooney	Joann Ricci
Joshua Moore	Nathaniel Rich
Patricia Morris	Edward Richards
Joe Morris Doss	Anne Riley
Cynthia Morse	Elizabeth Jane Rolling
Rebecca Mowbray	Mark Romig
Anne Mueller	Tyler Rosebush
Anthony J. Mumphrey, Jr	Bruce Rosen
David Munroe	Sandy Rosenthal
Jan Murphy	Karen Rowley
Nancy Murray	Andre Rubenstein
Kathleen Gibson Muse	Tim Ruppert
David Muth	Bebe Ryan
Steve Myers	Mathew Sanders
Hassan Nagendra	Julie Sanders
Jana Napoli	Drew Sanders
Doug Nehrbass	Madhav Saxena
Wayne Neveu	Phyllis Scarsone
David Newman	Susan Schadt
Bev and Ray Nichols	Holly Scheib
Karen Norfleet	Jen Schnidman
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***The Lens** strives to provide tools that enable you to advocate for a functional, accountable government.*

The mission of The Lens is to engage and empower the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by providing the information and analysis necessary to advocate for more accountable and just governance.

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