

Publisher's notes Mark Singletary

New Orleans providing a model for renewal



IT'S NOT TOO often when the rest of the country comes to New Orleans to figure out how to make a bureaucratic work well. But it happened last week near City Park.

Warren Buffett, Thomas Cousins and Julian Robertson, three very successful, very philanthropic superstars from the business world, created the nonprofit Purpose Built Communities, dedicated to transforming struggling neighborhoods into vibrant, sustainable developments.

Buffett, Cousins and Robertson's son, Alex, came to New Orleans last week to get a close look at the work of the Bayou District Foundation, lead partner for a new residential development where the former St. Bernard Housing Community once stood.

Its first phase, Columbia Parc, is a mixed income-residential community that may well change the concept of public housing in New Orleans. In addition to nice apartments, townhomes, green spaces and recreational areas, Columbia Parc has something else going for it. It is a Purpose Built Community.

Cousins, a well-known homebuilder and developer from Atlanta, was the driving force behind the redevelopment of that city's East Lake neighborhood, which was a high-crime, high-density, typical run-down public housing development that was transformed into a model of urban renewal.

Robertson, now retired, was a successful New York hedge fund manager, while Buffett, chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, is a world-renowned investor and philanthropist.

The three came together and started Purpose Built Communities to provide a framework for support and modeling holistic community developments, something developers hope Columbia Parc will become.

Holistic, as defined by the philosopher Aristotle, means the "whole is more than the sum of its parts." I wondered how that could possibly apply to a residential development. Last week, the visitors explained just that.

Along the way, they added some clarity to the Purpose Built Communities discussion and checked out Columbia Parc and how it fits in with the group's holistic approach to real estate developments.

OPINION

The group took a brief walk through some of the Columbia Parc apartments but was really here to ensure Bayou District developers are incorporating holistic aspects into the project.

Education, housing and economics must be blended into a package that assimilates residents into productive, active participants in the larger community. To ensure compliance, Purpose Built Communities acts as a consultant, free of charge, as projects develop.

While Bayou District doesn't have formal benchmarks to achieve, Charles Knapp, president of Purpose Built Communities, said there is constant review and interaction between his group and the local developers.



Investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett, left, tours the Columbia Parc development Tuesday with Bayou District Foundation Chairman Gerry Barrosse.

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Cousins, speaking to community activists who were also on hand for the Columbia Parc tour, said that while the bureaucratic obstacles were initially significant for the East Lake project in Atlanta, the results were startling.

"Children that grow up here (East Lake) are going to be good citizens — taxpayers not tax users," Cousins said. Former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, also in attendance, echoed Cousins' support for the project.

But Buffett provided the day's most emotional statement of commitment for Purpose Built Communities projects.

When asked what happens with Purpose Built Communities' support, his response was immediate: "We are changing a lot of lives," he said.

At the end of the get-together, Buffett, Cousins and Robertson left to spread more charm and pixie dust around the world. The visiting community activists headed home to start their own Purpose Built Communities, with New Orleans as the model for a new kind of public-private economic and social development.

That's a pretty good story. •

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