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Ground broken for new St. Bernard housing complex

by Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune

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More than a dozen federal, state and local officials hoisted shovels and beamed Tuesday morning as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development broke ground for construction of 466 apartments at the former St. Bernard public housing development.

The mixed-income complex will bear a new name: Columbia Citi Residences at Bayou District. The event signaled the start of a \$138 million, two-year phase of a long-term development plan.

"Are we here for a celebration or what?" asked Mayor Ray Nagin. His jubilant remark was echoed, albeit less boisterously, by most officials who spoke at the ceremony.

City Council President Jackie Clarkson called the event "monumental," Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell said the redevelopment represented an "economic engine" for her district, and HUD Secretary Steve Preston dubbed it "an important milestone" in the city's recovery.

But Maj. Gen. Douglas O'Dell, federal coordinator for Gulf Coast rebuilding, set the tenor of the event, noting that amid the festivity there is much work to be done.

While he praised HUD for "taking public housing in a different direction in the city of New Orleans," O'Dell cautioned that there remains a severe shortage of housing for low-income residents.

A bitter struggle between housing activists and government officials led up to the groundbreaking. Remnants of the fight literally cast a shadow: The gathering was held between a pair of light-brown brick buildings, two of a handful of salvaged St. Bernard buildings that will be stripped and rehabbed, a compromise gesture by housing officials and developers.

Former residents alternately spoke lovingly of the bricks that had sheltered them and decried a woeful lack of maintenance in the past by the Housing Authority of New Orleans, of mildew, inoperable plumbing and hunks of peeling paint that left many children with heightened lead levels in their bloodstreams.

Longtime St. Bernard resident leader Naomi Minor sent many letters about the buildings' poor conditions before Hurricane Katrina hit, and she supported the idea of a rebuilt complex that would be a safer place to live, she said.

Kowana Lyons, 34, who had lived her entire life at the St. Bernard complex, agreed that the decades-old buildings had deteriorated. But she was too fond of what she called "our bricks" -- the solid concrete and brick structures -- to embrace the new development's side-by-side townhome designs, which struck her as flimsy by comparison.

A few steps away, lifelong resident Cantrese Wilson, 35, said her children are homesick for their friends and she too aches for former neighbors. So she's a little impatient.

"I feel like it's about time something happened," she said.

Other residents -- demolition opponents who were barred from the groundbreaking because they were seen as disruptive at other HUD events -- chanted opposition from the sidewalk and occasionally yelled "sellout" at former neighbors who were allowed to participate.

One of them, Theresa Henry, 60, moved into St. Bernard in 1948 and paid rent there all of her adult life, usually \$399 for her three-bedroom apartment. But she believed that rules for returning residents announced by the developer, Columbia Residential, went too far, including, she said, a ban on barbecuing; a 9 p.m. curfew beyond which no one can sit outside, even on the resident's own porch; and a requirement that all visitors sign in.

Louisiana Recovery Authority Executive Director Paul Rainwater nodded toward the protesters. "I hear the voices in the background, and what I've said to them is what I say to you, this is just the beginning."

Construction of more affordable housing will follow in short order, he promised.

During an afternoon symposium at Tulane University, Rainwater, O'Dell and housing experts discussed how to address the city's shortage of affordable housing.

After the bigwigs had set down their shovels Tuesday morning, Minor and a half-dozen other former residents picked up shovels and posed for the cameras.

"Usually St. Bernard has been on the back burner," Minor said, recalling how building repairs and programs for residents often were launched at favored housing complexes like Lafitte and then ran out of steam and money by the time they got to St. Bernard.

"But this time, St. Bernard got a chance to do it first," she said with pride.

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