

The Times-Picayune

Tenants vie for public housing in redeveloped St. Bernard complex

by Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune

Thursday July 02, 2009, 8:31 AM

Before Hurricane Katrina, Asia Baptist Church often hummed with activity from residents of the nearby St. Bernard public housing complex.

Beginning last year, after federal and local housing officials moved to demolish the 7th Ward complex, the small brick church looked out upon a swath of lifeless, dusty land.

On Wednesday, Asia Baptist again became a hub of the St. Bernard community, as a steady stream of former residents came through to pick up applications for rental units in a redeveloped St. Bernard. The planned mixed-income complex, first dubbed "Columbia Citi at the Bayou District" now has the official name of "Columbia Parc at the Bayou District."

Within the first hour of the event, Columbia Parc staff gave out about 50 applications, one of them to Marie Lyons, 46, who moved into the St. Bernard when she was a toddler and lived there until Hurricane Katrina struck.

This week and next, every weekday morning from 9 a.m. to noon, former residents can pick up applications at the church. Residents can also download the form online at www.StBernardNow.com or get one by calling 1.877.878.2669. Completed applications must be e-mailed or postmarked by July 17.

By the end of this year, 52 of the subsidized apartments are scheduled to be open.

Lyons is living in the Fischer development in Algiers but doesn't feel comfortable there. She would like the chance to move back to the only place she knew as home, she said.

The number of public-housing spots will be significantly lower in the new development. Before Katrina, the development was home to 963 public-housing households, which paid monthly "HUD rent" up to one-third of their income.

By comparison, the first phase of Columbia Parc includes 466 apartments, but only 157 will be subsidized public-housing apartments where rent is based on income. The remainder will be 149 market-rate apartments and 160 "affordable" tax-credit units that target moderate-income households, charging rent significantly higher than that faced by public-housing families.

Once the July 17 deadline passes, Columbia will screen potential tenants, collecting details on their credit, criminal and rental histories. Longtime former residents receive priority: The waiting-list rankings are determined by each applicant's original move-in date, a development representative said. Priority will also be given to elderly and disabled people and to families with an employed head of household.

.....

Katy Reckdahl can be reached at kreckdahl@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3396.