

Riverside high-rise proposal challenged

N.O. panel objects to height, traffic

By Bruce Eggler
Staff writer

It's the kind of project that many people said New Orleans needed after Hurricane Katrina: a 210-unit apartment complex, including more than 80 units for lower-income workers, to be built next to the river and close to the city's commercial core.

Volunteers of America President Jim LeBlanc said the project would be a "fantastic development" that would help the charitable organization reach its goal of replacing 1,000 units of housing for elderly, low-income and special-needs people that were lost in Katrina.

However, it appears the City Council will have to ride to the

See **HIGH-RISE**, A-8

Nonprofit proposes mixed-income units

HIGH-RISE, from A-1

rescue if the nonprofit organization is to be allowed to build the mixed-income complex in the 1700 block of Tchoupitoulas Street.

The City Planning Commission recently turned thumbs down on the project even though it was endorsed by the commission's staff. The final decision is up to the council.

The proposal drew criticism at a commission hearing from Coliseum Square Association leaders, who challenged several aspects of the \$46 million project but especially plans for a 150-foot-high residential building.

Although the site's zoning would allow a building as high as 200 feet, the critics said they don't want a high-rise building on the riverfront near the neighborhood.

The project had to go before the commission and the council because the developers are seeking a special zoning designation. Without the "residential planned community district overlay" the developers want, the site would be limited to 90 residential units.

Victor Smeltz, executive director of the Renaissance Neighborhood Development Corp., a local subsidiary of the Volunteers of America, said he found the rejection of his group's proposal "shocking" because it did not "appear to be grounded in either the underlying (zoning) code or any of the planning goals established for this riverfront district over the past several years."

The project would be financed with a combination of private investment, housing tax credits, Community Development Block Grant money and loans, he said.

Although Renaissance — which also is working on large "affordable family housing" projects in Gentilly and on Tulane Avenue — is still considering its options and talking with neighbors, Smeltz said, it probably will take the issue to the council.

The site is in Councilwoman Stacy Head's district. Head said she has not formed an opinion about the project.

If the proposal goes to the council, neighbors who did not

address the commission would be prepared to speak in favor of it, Smeltz said.

No condominiums

Renaissance bought the two-acre site early this year for about \$3.2 million. It includes the entire block on the river side of Tchoupitoulas between Celeste and Nuns streets. The site is about two blocks downriver from the Wal-Mart Supercenter, construction of which stirred controversy several years ago.

Renaissance plans to demolish two commercial or industrial buildings on the site but to restore a 19th-century building once used as a cotton press.

The first phase of the project would include a 14-story, 150-unit residential building, plus 13,000 square feet of commercial space in the cotton press building. A second phase would add a five-story, 60-unit residential building and another 18,000 square feet of commercial space.

Smelts said the residential spaces would all be apartments, not condominiums, and 40 percent would be reserved for people making less than 60 percent of the area's median income. The rest would be rented at market rates.

Most of the apartments would have one or two bedrooms, with a few three-bedroom units.

Although the developers proposed providing only 248 off-street parking spaces, they agreed to accept the planning staff's recommendation for at least 435 spaces.

However, the project drew criticism from three leaders of the Coliseum Square group.

President Andrew Yon said the association does not object to having affordable housing in the Lower Garden District, but it opposes authorizing a high-rise building that would tower over a planned riverfront park and set a precedent for other large-scale developments along the river.

Height, traffic concerns

The height limit for buildings on the river side of Tchoupitoulas Street in the Lower Garden District used to range between

35 to 75 feet. Acting on recommendations from the Planning Commission, the council increased that to 200 feet in April 2007.

At the time, neighborhood residents did not oppose the change, which also involved reducing the height limit for areas closer to residential neighborhoods. However, Yon said residents now regret allowing the changes, and he said the master plan and revised zoning ordinance due for completion in 2009 could well reverse them.

Other critics said traffic on Tchoupitoulas is so heavy that it would be dangerous to allow a large new residential complex there.

"We don't want to be used as a test tube for this experiment," said one resident, Julie Simpson.

The commission voted 6-0 to recommend that the council reject the proposal. Several members said they had concerns about the project's height and the traffic it would generate. They suggested that the Volunteers of America instead should spend its money renovating blighted houses in the Lower Garden District and other neighborhoods.

Commissioner Lou Volz, a former president of the Coliseum Square Association, said the building's height and appearance would be inappropriate for the neighborhood. He also said he fears the building would sit empty if the demand for apartments lessens, and that allowing its construction would lead to a proliferation of high-rises along the river.

Joining Volz in voting against the project were Chairman Ed Robinson, George Amedee, Kelly Brown, Lois Carlos-Lawrence and Lester Johnson. Sandra Duckworth, Tim Jackson and Poco Sloss were absent.

Smeltz said later that Renaissance is considering buying and renovating scattered properties in the city for sale to people who would rather own than rent, but that not all the elements of the financing for the Tchoupitoulas project could be transferred to such efforts.

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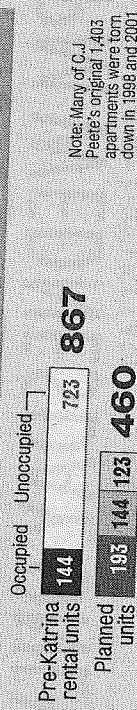
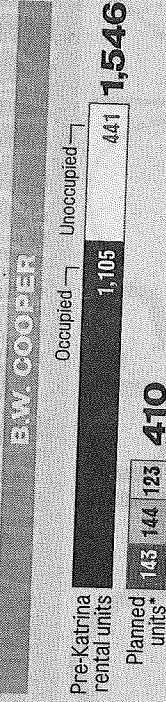
HUD PLANS FEWER LOW-RENT UNITS

Agency will build three tiers of mixed-income apartments

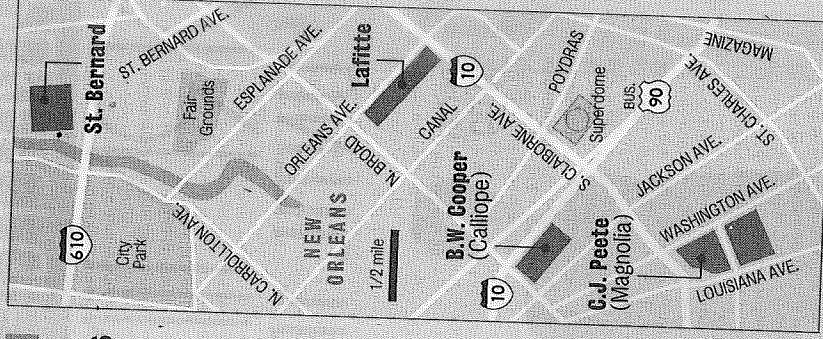
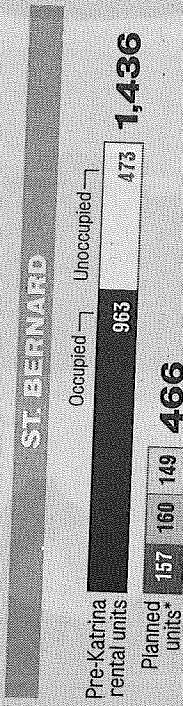
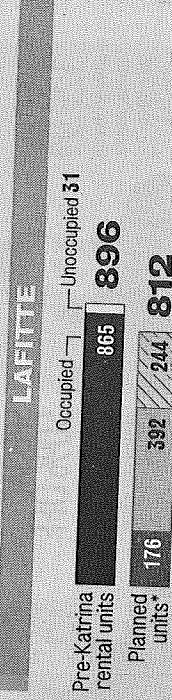
KEY FOR PLANNED UNITS

- Public housing rentals:** For households earning up to 40% of local median income.
- Affordable rentals:** For households earning between 40% and 60% of local median income.
- Market-rate rentals:** For households earning more than 80% of local median income.
- Homeownership units:** Reasonably priced homes, many tied to city subsidies.

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Note: Many of C.J. Peete's original 1,403 apartments were torn down in 1998 and 2001 and not rebuilt.



TOTAL PRE-KATRINA RENTAL UNITS:

Before Hurricane Katrina there were 4,601 rental units, but only two-thirds of the units were in use.

*First phase only, of a two-phase housing rebuilding plan.

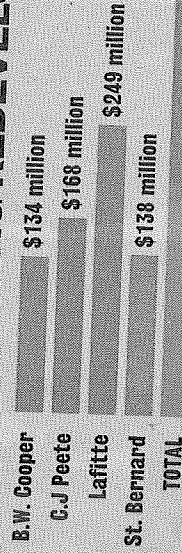
UNITS PLANNED IN PHASE ONE:

3,077
Occupied rentals

668 + **836** + **400**
Public housing rentals
Affordable rentals
Market-rate rentals

1,904
Total rentals

PUBLIC HOUSING REDEVELOPMENT COSTS



Source: Department of Housing and Urban Development