

Hurricane Katrina rebuilding takes a big step at Lafitte public housing site

by Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune

Thursday August 27, 2009

http://www.nola.com/hurricane/index.ssf/2009/08/hurricane_katrina_rebuilding_t.html



David Grunfeld/The Times-Picayune

Shovels stand ready for Thursday's groundbreaking at the Lafitte public housing complex.

As Thursday's groundbreaking for the redevelopment of the Lafitte Public Housing complex drew closer, 75-year-old Emelda Paul created her own pictorial history of the 6th Ward site where she lived for nearly 30 years until it was shuttered after Hurricane Katrina.

Her snapshots include one of her sister, Mabel Veal, masked as a Mardi Gras Indian on Orleans and Claiborne avenues, the popular Carnival intersection that's also sometimes called the front door of the Lafitte.

On Thursday, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan lauded that cultural heritage as he sunk a silver-painted shovel into the ground to kick off construction of a new community to replace Lafitte's solid brick buildings, now almost completely demolished.



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Emelda Paul, right, president of the Lafitte resident council, gets a standing ovation Thursday. Behind her is HANO's Diane Johnson. Paul said that even though her physical home on the Lafitte site has not been rebuilt, she feels back home again.

"No city has more character, even today, " he said, describing the devastation that flooding from breached levees left behind and reaffirming his commitment to cutting through red tape and hastening the rebuilding process in the city.

And while New Orleans is often called "the city that care forgot, " Donovan pledged, "it cannot and will not be the city that the Obama administration forgot."



David Grunfeld/The Times-Picayune

James '12' Andrews entertains Thursday as those at the 6th Ward site celebrate the remaking of the Lafitte complex.

During the groundbreaking, Donovan stood next to Paul, who is president of Lafitte's resident council. As cameras clicked, they both threw sandy soil into the air and were serenaded by trumpeter James Andrews, whom Paul has known since he was a "little bitty" boy visiting his grandmother, Lafitte resident Dorothy Hill. Sometimes Andrews and his younger brother Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews would play in Lafitte driveways with a band of 30 to 40 young kids wearing five-gallon paint buckets around their necks for drums, she said.

Stories and snapshots like Paul's will be compiled into "Lafitte Stories, " a history of the development that's

being assembled by former residents and by developers Providence Community Housing, Enterprise Community Partners and L+M Development Partners. As Lafitte moves toward a new community -- or "a new Jerusalem, " as Paul often says -- history is essential, she said.

A close community

So she and other residents speak frankly about the fact that their former apartments had mold even before Hurricane Katrina and that drug dealers operated in broad daylight out of some of the U-shaped back courtyards.

In spite of the obstacles, most of the residents say they still managed to experience a close-knit community, sharing whatever they had, cooking for one another and watching each other's children so that fathers could work long hours or so that mothers could finish college.

Three years ago, in a series of well-attended planning meetings, residents basically designed the new Lafitte, asking for [a reconnected street grid](#) in place of the development's "superblocks" and a variety of smaller-scale buildings, each with its own yard.

They also asked for -- and will get -- single-family cottages and shotgun-style singles and doubles, with porches and traditional architectural filigree.

And unlike HANO's other "[Big Four](#)" sites, which plan to replace about one-third of public-housing apartments, Lafitte plans to replace every single one for a total of 900 subsidized apartments, along with an additional 600 homes that will be sold to low-income working families and first-time homebuyers.

The vast 27.5-acre parcel where the complex used to stand has been subdivided into 517 lots, with 376 rental apartments and 141 for-sale homes. The rest of the homes and apartments will be in the surrounding area, mostly in the Tulane-Gravier neighborhood.



David Grunfeld/The Times-Picayune

New Orleans 'cannot and will not be the city that the Obama administration forgot,' HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan said.

Move-in expected next year

For the portion of the site that broke ground on Thursday, the Louisiana Recovery Authority and HANO provided \$16 million, with investor Capital One adding nearly \$35 million in capital, for 57 for-sale homes and 134 rental units, all of them affordable to public-housing residents. The developers anticipate completing financial closings for the remainder of the site by the end of this year, with residents able to move into apartments at some point next year.

Lafitte's developers and residents also are committed to strengthening the entire community by working with the Recovery School District to create high-quality schools, with Tulane University to create its [new clinic](#) inside the former Ruth's Chris steakhouse at North Broad Street and Orleans Avenue, and with childcare experts to create an accredited nursery on the site. Caseworkers have been working with residents since the end of the 2006, using a pot of social-service money raised by Catholic Charities specifically for Lafitte residents.

Things are falling into place, Paul said. As a result, even though her physical home on the Lafitte site has not been rebuilt, she feels back home again, she said. She's once again singing in the nearby St. Peter Claver Catholic Church choir and running weekly senior-citizen bingo extravaganzas at the Sojourner Truth Community Center on Lafitte Street.

And there, at Sojourner Truth, she is "extra proud" to report that you can once again hear children's laughter.

That happy sound, she said, is the future of Lafitte.

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