

## The Right Answer in New Orleans

New Orleans will never recover economically unless it attracts a work force large enough to drive the industries upon which the city has historically depended for its livelihood. Low-wage workers, in particular, are unlikely to return until the tens of thousands of rental houses and apartments that were destroyed by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina are replaced. To secure its economic future, the region needs an aggressive, farsighted plan for rebuilding the rental housing stock and creating more affordable housing.

Housing advocates, business leaders and elected officials at all levels will need to come together on this issue. At the moment, the factions are bitterly split over the federal government's plan that calls for demolishing some of the city's notorious public housing projects and replacing them with mixed-income communities. The warring sides need to understand that it's possible to build vibrant mixed communities and to expand the supply of affordable housing at the same time.

Senator Mary Landrieu, Democrat of Louisiana, is sponsoring a bill that would essentially require the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to replace every public housing apartment it demolishes by either building another apartment on the same site or by creating an affordable unit elsewhere. Many housing advocates have embraced the bill, as has the Louisiana Recovery Authority, whose board consists mainly of business and civic leaders.

HUD, however, has denounced the one-for-one provision as anathema to the mixed-income concept. And Louisiana's Republican senator, David Vitter, seems determined to kill the bill by any means necessary, perhaps simply to prevent Ms. Landrieu from winning a legislative victory in advance of the 2008 elections. Mr. Vitter has unfairly described the bill and the one-for-one replacement provision as a stealth plan for rebuilding the scary and often violent housing projects exactly as they were.

The facts suggest otherwise. The two most prominent developers retained by HUD to help rebuild the city's public housing system have embraced the replacement paradigm. The developers, **Providence Community Housing** and **Enterprise Community Partners**, are scheduled to build on 27.5 acres now occupied by the Lafitte project. They have a plan that calls for building 900 rental units to replace the current development and to build 600 new affordable homes for working families and first-time homeowners.

By working in partnership with community organizations and acquiring land in adjacent communities, Providence and Enterprise hope to create a healthy, economically integrated community where the public housing stigma no longer applies and low-income and working-class residents live side by side in identical housing units. The plan also calls for schools, health care, youth programs, job opportunities and job training. The developers have committed some of their own money, but the project is largely financed by federal tax credits and block grants.

The public housing issue is only part of the overall housing picture. Louisiana must also get cracking on a long-overdue program to restore more than 80,000 rental apartments destroyed by the storms. The recovery authority says it has committed funds for rebuilding about 33,000 those, but much more needs to be done. The Lafitte design shows that it is possible to satisfy the need to replace destroyed public housing and to create vibrant new communities of mixed incomes. State, federal and local officials need to take that lesson and run with it.