



Everything New Orleans

Historic houses being moved from Mid-City footprint for new VA hospital

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Bill Barrow, The Times-Picayune

Builders of Hope, a city of New Orleans contractor, has started moving historic houses from the Mid-City footprint that will become home to a new U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs medical complex.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu joined Friday with several elected officials and not-for-profit executives in an attempt to celebrate the redevelopment program as an alternative to razing the structures. But the event evolved into a contentious affair as neighborhood residents, businesspeople and community activists used the forum to blast the government's planning process for the VA hospital and the adjacent state teaching hospital that will replace the shuttered Charity Hospital.

Landrieu and others acknowledged the controversy during prepared remarks as they stood in front of a truck ready to haul the house formerly at 2426 Palmyra St. to its new lot at 2332 St. Louis St.

"Not everybody is going to get everything they want," Landrieu said. "But today we have found common ground."

Council members Stacy Head and Kristin Palmer made similar pronouncements, while Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson praised the mayor for the "political courage" to push the moving plan.

The city previously obligated \$79 million in federal hurricane recovery grants to the land acquisition and site preparation of the VA footprint. Under the revised program, the city has redirected \$3.2 million to Builders of Hope to move as many as 100 houses that meet certain historic benchmarks.

That money will pay for houses to be moved to and secured on foundations on other New Orleans lots controlled by Builders of Hope or another nonprofit organization such as Habitat for Humanity. Those organizations then will pay for the renovation needs.

Lew Schulman, chief operating officer of Builders of Hope, said the goal is to have as many as 100 houses moved by the end of October, with the structures being restored and back on the residential market no later than nine months after they are settled on a new site.

Palmer said the plan "keeps material out of the landfill" and rehabilitates homes whose architecture is unique to New Orleans and Mid-City.

Yet as elected officials paraded to the microphone, several voices in the gallery shouted questions and protests, telling Landrieu that homeowners are not being adequately compensated and businesses aren't being compensated at all for their lost revenue. Others noted that historic structures in the state footprint -- particularly McDonough No. 11 School on Palmyra and the Deutsches Haus on Sought Galvez -- are still slated for demolition.

State contractors are handling land acquisition for both medical complexes. They have filed dozens of expropriations on properties whose owners have not accepted the government's offering price.

Brad Ott, a New Orleans resident who consistently advocates for reopening Charity Hospital, told Landrieu afterward, "There's just not trust around this entire project," as the mayor nodded.

The exchange highlights the political tightrope for Landrieu, who supports the VA complex and building a new state hospital, though he pushed for the house relocation program and continues to wrangle with the state over the details of its hospital design.

Listening to Sandra Stokes of the Foundation for a Historical Louisiana, Landrieu's frustration became apparent. "Do you want these houses moved or not?" he asked. When she nodded, he replied, "Then say, 'Moving these houses is a good thing.'"

After that conversation, Stokes said Landrieu and other officials all mentioned the issues with the project and said they inherited the land acquisition agreement from Mayor Ray Nagin's administration.

"It is so much better than going in the landfill," she said, "but that doesn't make this right. We've saved these houses, but we're still losing a diverse historic community. ... It's never too late to do the right thing."

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