

## **UNANIMOUS**

### **COUNCIL VOTES TO RAZE 4,500 UNITS OLD HOUSING MODEL TO GIVE WAY TO MIXED-INCOME DEVELOPMENTS**

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Unbowed by days of caustic protests, the New Orleans City Council on Thursday unanimously approved the demolition of four sprawling public housing developments, launching a new era in the troubled history of a social safety net launched in the World War II era. The historic vote -- embracing sweeping plans to house the poor in mixed-income developments -- green-lighted the razing of 4,500 apartments at the B.W. Cooper, C.J. Peete, St. Bernard and Lafitte housing complexes, with teardowns to commence within weeks.

During the next five years, the Department of Housing and Urban Development will replace the aging complexes with 3,343 public housing units, 900 market-rate rental units and 900 homes for sale, with many of them marketed, with financial subsidies, to former public housing residents.

"The past model of public housing in this city has been a failed one," said Council President Arnie Fielkow at the close of a bruising five-hour debate. But he said the Housing Authority's work in erecting handsome new buildings in the Fischer and Guste complexes in recent years left him convinced that public housing residents "can indeed live in a quality, safe and uplifting environment."

The City Council took up the demolition issue only after plaintiffs in a lawsuit said HUD had failed to comply with a 2002 city ordinance that requires a permit to be approved by the council before demolition permits are issued for public housing.

The unanimous decision, which put to rest some predictions of a racially split vote, handed a major victory to President Bush's housing aides, who have pushed for mixed-income developments as a way to restore an original goal of public housing: to provide transitional housing to help people elevate themselves from poverty. Rather than isolating the poor in dense developments, where some families have stayed for generations, the redeveloped projects seek to integrate them with a cross-section of society, while at the same time luring private developers.

But anti-demolition activists, seething with distrust of HUD and the developers it contracts, depicted the vote as a blow to thousands of needy New Orleanians, many displaced since the flood, because it sharply reduces the number of public housing units planned for rehabilitation or construction.

#### **Rejecting even exchange**

Council members rejected the notion, backed by some congressional officials, that every lost public housing unit should be replaced with a new one.

Federal housing officials insisted that voucher programs that provide rent to those in private apartments will cover displaced residents until the new developments are completed. Critics counter that vouchers bring new difficulties because some of the private units are in poor shape and private rentals bring extra utilities and deposit charges.

Pamela Mahogany, a former resident of the St. Bernard complex, told a nearly packed City Council chamber that "I have worked hard all my life" and that she and other displaced residents should have more say in what changes are ushered in for public housing.

She berated District D Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell's argument that lead contamination and other poor conditions at the St. Bernard complex make it a candidate for removal, saying the councilwoman should have done more about such problems long ago.

"I have no trust in the federal government. I have no trust in the City Council," Mahogany said. A National Trust for Historic Preservation representative, Walter Gallas, called the sweeping agenda for remaking the four large public housing sites "planning by demolition," noting there is no evidence of City Planning Commission input. "I fear we are back to the old days of urban renewal," he said.

Many critics of the federal plan think the stout old buildings that make up the vast majority of structures in the "big four" complexes could be restored at a modest cost, and quickly, and that idea gained favor in city recovery planning meetings a year ago.

But federal officials said the demolition and redevelopment plan would cost about \$600 million, while correcting pre-existing code violations and other problems with the aging developments would cost \$745 million.

### **Eager for changes**

Embracing a strategy touted by federal housing officials, council members pushed the idea of using mixed-income settings, work-force training and homeownership incentives to help public housing residents move toward self-sufficiency, breaking the pattern of generations of families that know no other home. At-large Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson and District C Councilman James Carter said they see a rare opportunity for boosting property ownership. "What person would want another person to be dependent on the government for the rest of their lives? Nobody," Carter said.

Council members said they were sympathetic to many concerns raised by public housing residents, but they gave a chilly reception to hostile chants -- many associated with tight police restrictions on how many people would be allowed in the chamber -- at the beginning of the meeting. Protesters were furious about reports, before Thursday's meeting, that a majority of the council was prepared to back the HUD demolition requests.

"Booooo! You no good sellout," one shouted as Hedge-Morrell entered the room. "She's in somebody's pocket, believe me," said another.

Fielkow, after a few warnings, told police to restore order, and several of the rowdiest members of the crowd were ejected, two after a nasty struggle.

Representatives of developer teams chosen by HUD to carry out the mixed-income agenda challenged one central argument of demolition critics, that displaced public housing residents haven't had a meaningful opportunity to shape what will happen to their old neighborhoods. The developers talked of planning charrettes, public hearings, newsletters, neighborhood steering committees and toll-free hotlines, all designed to elicit feedback from people who have a stake in plans for housing changes.

Donna Johnigan, a resident leader at B.W. Cooper, gave a resounding reply to the protesters who called anyone in line with HANO's redevelopment "sellouts."

"I take it personally. Sell out? Because we want better homes, better schools?" she said, her voice filling the meeting room.

"Where were all these advocates and people who support us now when years ago we asked them to support (public housing families)? Where were these people when we needed HUD to put money in so that we wouldn't be here today? If the money was there Cooper would have had a new face before this."

### **Jefferson request ignored**

The council wasn't swayed by a request from U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, read into the record by a representative, for a 60-day delay in a decision on the demolitions to allow for crafting a "more inclusive" plan for redevelopment. That move will help avert more suffering by long-displaced residents, he said.

"They left their homes because of the storm, as we all did," he said. "But when the lights and water were turned back on and people united to return to the city, these low-income people, law-abiding citizens, who held proper and currently paid leases, were locked out by HANO. This was not right then, and it is not right to lock tenants out of livable units at this time."

One of the modest concessions HANO made in securing the council's approval was to agree -- yet again -- to temporarily reopen about 100 units at Lafitte. In addition, HANO announced for the first time Thursday it will refurbish and temporarily reopen 75 units at St. Bernard. Both complexes have been shuttered since Katrina struck.

Mayor Ray Nagin said he pushed for that concession among others, including an agreement by HUD to expand a board that runs HANO, now with a single commissioner, Donald Babers, to three, including a representative of the mayor and a public housing resident.

Nagin applauded the council's unanimous vote on the demolition, saying it reflected "compassion, courage and commitment to this city . . . You heard lots of pain today. The City Council in its wisdom has come up with a solution that will allow us to move forward, and to hold HUD accountable."

Fielkow said he was influenced by a visit to the East Lake development in Atlanta, a mixed-income neighborhood linked to a public golf course that replaced a crime-plagued public housing complex. Critics of HUD's new housing strategies are quick to note that a small percentage of the public housing development that East Lake replaced have found their way back to the rebuilt neighborhood. But Byron Williams, a coach who grew up in the St. Bernard public housing complex and now lives at East Lake, came to the council hearing to back the HUD plan.

"I love St. Bernard, but at some point in time we've got to move forward," Williams told the council. "I'm for demolition. If you lead, I'm going to follow."

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