

CITY OF NEW ORLEANS
NEW ORLEANS BUILDING CORPORATION

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Reinventing the Crescent Downriver Park
Public Meeting Two
October 06, 2008
Meeting Minutes

The public meeting began a few minutes after 7:00 in the Chapel at the Holy Angels Community Complex. Sean Cummings, CEO of the New Orleans Building Corporation, welcomed everyone. He reminded everyone that this is a big project and that great cities, like New Orleans, are shifting from places where we must go for a job to places we choose for the quality of life. New Orleans is therefore in the quality of life business. He then introduced Dr. Norman Francis, President of Xavier University and Treasurer for the New Orleans Building Corporation.

Dr. Francis wanted to be at this meeting following his roll with the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA). It was not an easy job, but the LRA was responsible for making sure the money was distributed equitably – 67 percent to New Orleans, which had 67 percent of the damage. With this money, we could say we aim to go back to the way things were, but all those days were not good. It would be immoral to go back to where we were. We need to go back to where we should have been. He commended the team and the public for coming together to discuss the plans and to get feedback. This Riverfront is something we should have done 20 years ago. Yes, we still need to build houses and hospitals, but there is more than enough money to go around. But if we wait to do projects like this - the big projects – until after the little projects are complete, we'll never get around to the big ones. He asked the public to view the team's ideas and to give their voice and ideas. Dr. Francis also spoke to the team's experience in working on Riverfront. He concluded by saying he is here to support this project and committed to making this city better than it was pre-Katrina.

Cummings introduced the team comprised of top tier talent capable of creating something specific to New Orleans and its unique sense of place.

Allen Eskew, principal of Eskew+Dumez+Ripple, described the property and noted that this is the second of eight public meetings within an aggressive schedule. Ground breaking is planned for December 2009. The project is fully funded, and tonight will be a continuation of the meeting at NOCCA. Tonight we will be discussing the mile and a half, divided into five sections, each described by George Hargreaves and Kirt Rieder, both from Hargreaves Associates.

01. MOONWALK PEDESTRIAN CONNECTOR

Kirt Rieder described the connector beginning at St. Philip Street as a narrow pedestrian corridor that will follow the landside of the floodwall. Right now it is a very tight urban sidewalk that is seven feet wide at one end and dwindles to nothing at the other. This is essential to providing that contiguous access from the Moonwalk. It will not cost a lot of money, but is necessary to work around the port's property.

02. MANDIVILLE WHARF

George Hargreaves reminded the crowd that this is not a design, but simply ideas for use. There will be some parking on South Peters which will be grass parking. There is also a placeholder for the connective element that provides an up and over. This is important because of the number of trains that go by here daily. He then introduced Michael Maltzan to come forward to describe his approach in designing the up and over.

Michael expressed his enthusiasm for the project. He explained his preference for architecture that creates connections. In this particular piece of the project, there is an opportunity to create a relationship between the neighborhood and the river. He showed a precedent from a project in Los Angeles, located adjacent to a historic neighborhood, where he imagined an iconic moment which represented a gateway into the park as well provided



programmatic conditions. To reach 23 feet, the height required by the trains, we will need a very long ramp. That provides the opportunity to create a new façade along the floodwall which could be aesthetically stronger than the existing condition. The bridge will be a destination in and of itself. Of course, the team is very mindful of the view down Spain Street. Movement and connections are both part of the work and the character of the site. You can almost imagine the ramp at the same pace as the trains and ships nearby. It is particularly important that the architecture has a strong sense of place and its roots in the New Orleans riverfront.

George resumed discussion of activities for the Mandeville Wharf and the adjacent deck. He expressed a interest in the archeology of the site and embracing the industrial character. The design team is proposing some sports programming for this area including artificial turf for soccer, sand volleyball courts, English bowling and bocce ball courts. George showed a project they had completed in Houston where the bocce ball courts were very popular. The shed also offers opportunities, but not necessarily large enough for basketball courts. Performance opportunities abound for this space. Water turbines are also proposed for the river adjacent to the shed, which may power the site as a demonstration of sustainability.

03. PRESS STREET PROMENADE

There is a lot of paving in this area as part of its industrial character. Some of the paving will stay and some will be removed. In terms of landscape, the team wants to create something natural that grows over time and is low maintenance. Ideally, the cost per square foot in this area is under \$7 per square foot. George showed the promenade at Chrissy Field in San Francisco where bicycle paths are separate from pedestrian paths. Nature will help design the project.

There are two piers proposed for the entire site, one of them as an extrusion of Press Street. Piers are actually the historic condition of this site. They will allow pedestrians to get out over the water. George showed images of a pier in Chattanooga on the Tennessee River which was designed with a local artist so that it lights up at night. Another precedent in Sydney was shown that provides access through some wetlands. This would be the character of the pier further downriver. The piers and other elements offer the opportunity to engage the local arts community in public arts projects.

In this area there is also a current demolition contract for the concrete and wood piers sticking out of the water. The design team would like to keep these piers and mount lights on them to create “dancing lights” on the water.

The team is also examining the possibility of using wind turbines in this area.

04. PIETY PARK

This is the area the team has imagined for a contemplative garden and structure. There is an opportunity for more grass parking. The team is looking at the existing industrial artifact. The fire wall, with some structural engineering, can be a beautiful icon on the riverfront that can also be the backdrop for smaller events. It is perfect for theater or dance. The wooden wharf will need some repair, which may be artfully considered.

The contemplative garden could have one of many characters. George showed some more organized manicured gardens. But the character which seems more appropriate reflects the nature of the River with flowing lines.

Joe Franchina from David Adjaye’s office stepped forward to describe the opportunity of the contemplative structure. He spoke of the character and quality of powerful contemplative spaces and of their simplicity. The design team really wants to demonstrate the power of the river and the natural beauty of the site using light and emphasizing the connection to the river.

George finished the description of Piety with the opportunity for a temporal art exhibit space on the wharf deck.

05. POLAND FIELDS

The team would like to create a topographically inspired playground past the wharf between the batture and the railroad tracks. This emphasizes the intent to make this a space for all ages to enjoy. The team needs to get a sense of demographics of the neighborhood to determine how much play space is needed. Beyond that would be a picnic area which would act as a buffer between the playground and a dog run which should not be compressed in size.

In summary, the team is trying to show some initial program ideas and what their character will be. The team tried to create two nodes of activity – Mandeville and Piety.

Allen Eskew introduced Carol Bebelle who is helping to write some community narratives that will inform the design. The three narratives will explore the roll of Native Americans, African Americans and the immigrants of the New Orleans community.

Allen then opened the floor for questions and ideas.

Chris Costello asked if the team had referenced the previously completed planning processes for the Riverfront. Allen confirmed that their design is a hybrid of all the processes. Chris asked the team to place these references on the website to which Sean noted that they already are posted on the website. He then asked how much will have to be built at Mandeville Wharf. Allen explained that there is no new building, just adaptive reuse of the existing structures. There is a covered shed area of 80,000 and the uncovered deck is almost 2 acres. Chris then asked about the grass parking and whether the grass would actually grow in these conditions. Kirt explained that the system included a plastic grid upon which the cars actually park and the grass grows between the grid. Chris expressed concern that grass would not actually grow in the New Orleans climate. He then asked how the security is going to be handled. Allen responded that the governance structure is still being determined, but that NOBC is in discussions with Audubon which has experience with this issue further upriver. Chris then reminded Allen of the meeting with Councilmember Clarkson in which an agreement with the neighborhood was decided upon. Allen confirmed that NOBC and the team will continue to work with the neighborhoods and with the Councilmembers to accomplish everyone's goals.

Rick Fifield asked if there was adequate parking for the park, particularly with relation to the upriver end of the park near the ramp. Allen explained that the uses have to be determined before the team can assess the parking needs. A traffic consultant is a member of the team, and will be engaged to determine the number of spaces and their location shortly. Rick told the team that the parking lots near the French Market are always full and there is going to be a problem if it is not solved upfront. He asked for the calculations based on zoning. Allen reminded him that the programming has to be determined prior to the parking calculations.

Constance Caruso of the Recovery School District (RSD) thanked the team for considering children in the design. She informed the team that there are four schools in the area that include K through 12th grade) that have no recreational opportunities. She offered to provide demographics to the team.

Someone suggested that the neighborhood ask for residential permitted parking as a solution to the parking problem. She also told the team that pine trees, while native to New Orleans, snap in strong storms. The design team thanked her for this insight.

Nathan Chapman asked if there was any work in this project proposed for the Jackson Square area. Allen answered no. He challenged the design team to think about how this project is about New Orleans. For him, Armstrong Park and Woldenberg feel like islands and unrelated to the French Quarter. He asked if the park can have the feeling of a comfortable sweater like the French Quarter and Marigny. George responded that he shows ideas from other cities because New Orleans does not have many good examples of recent work that relates to this project. For him, the real eye opener is the plethora of relics on the Riverfront. The team does not want to deliver Houston or New York, but rather something that is uniquely New Orleans. There will be elements however that are extraordinary and signature, but that is not counter to New Orleans either. As the design evolves, he has confidence that the public will believe the team is doing the right thing. For today, just think of this as programming and placing it.

Carolyn Leftwich thanked the design team for taking some many ideas that Bywater had suggested. She asked for calcification on the location of the children's park to which the image was re-presented. She asked that the relationship between Piety Park and Marky Park be reinforced. Allen confirmed that this project is limited to Piety Park but that it should re-energize Marky Park. Carolyn also noted that tall trees on the batture could actually block the existing views from upper stories.

A gentleman asked if there was only one up and over. Allen responded yes but that there were pedestrian crossings at grade at certain floodgates.

Another gentleman asked if the contemplative garden was right next to the tracks and if so, it might not be too quiet and contemplative in nature. The team took note of the concern.

Julie Jones asked who will pay for the governance. Mr. Eskew answered that there are three or four options being considered which will be addressed at a future meeting. Julie asked if there was pressure to generate revenue in the park. Allen answered no. As has often been said and published in the Plan, this project is intended to be relatively inexpensive to maintain. It will, like most parks, lose some money since the benefits of parks is diffuse. There will also be some revenue generated from periodic special events, festivals, fairs and the like to help offset some of the costs of maintaining the property.

A man in the audience warned the team to be careful with the ramp at Mandeville because if it is anything like the ferry terminal at Canal Street, it will be seen as a negative.

David Peltier of Bywater asked if it was true that New Orleans Cold Storage is a “done deal” and said that he had been told that by a few citizens who attended the Port’s September 30 meeting on the topic.

Allen Eskew responded that he had been at the Port’s most recent meeting and heard the answer provided by Pat Galway. In short, Pat said that the design and engineering work was full speed ahead based on authorization from the Port Board of Commissioners. Eskew noted that the current authorization was for design. Bidding and actual construction would require subsequent approvals by the Port.

Nathan Chapman objected to the Cold Storage facility being discussed without a representative of the Port being present. Mr. Chapman complained that the riverfront design team’s reference to the daily truck traffic (100 trucks per day) was “unfair” and that the design team was out of line in discussing the facility.

Mr. Eskew reminded Mr. Chapman that at the Port’s meeting he endorsed the Cold Storage project and its location next to the French Quarter as a legitimate example of a working wharf.

Mr. Peltier said that given this back and forth, it was quite confusing and not all clear for folks to know the facts.

Mr. Cummings asked if anyone from the Port was present, however their representative had already left the meeting. He continued that he has probably spoken more with Port officials about the Cold Storage location than anyone else and would try to provide an objective set of facts as best he knew them. He stated that (01) No one, including the Port, feels like the Governor Nicholls location is ideal or optimal. (02) The Port has selected this site because it is what it can afford, in other words more of convenience in that a wharf deck exists and that that makes this location roughly 50% cheaper than other locations. (03) As for the project being a “done deal”, Mr. Cummings said that the answer to that question is likely “no” because the Port is seeking roughly \$35 million from the State legislature to fund the project and that if Mr. Peltier was opposed to it he should express the same to the Port and to the legislative branches of government because they will have to vote for its funding and that this is how a representative democracy works (04) Cummings said that he understood there to be an anticipated tractor-trailer count of 70 – 100 trucks per day on Elysian Fields and possibly other streets, (05) that the Port intended to demolish at least one wharf shed to accommodate parking and was, to his knowledge, considering perhaps demolishing Governor Nicholls as well if it were less expensive to erect a new facility vs. retrofitting the existing one. (06) Cummings noted that the contemplated move from the industrial canal area was triggered by the closing of the MRGO waterway and that this site was again chosen due to the relative speed with which it might be created, 18 months instead of 3 years.

Mr. Chapman interrupted saying that this was all inappropriate and “slanderous” and that he would make sure that at the next meeting the topic was raised earlier in the meeting so that one or more people from the Port could participate.

(06) Mr. Cummings continued saying that the company supported economic growth with more hinterland poultry farmers as well as regional longshoreman jobs and paid the Port something like \$1.3 million a year in rent (07) He

stated that one of the negative impacts of the facility is that it makes access to the riverfront and along it virtually impossible in this area and that it was the City's hope that a different location might be found due to the impact that this particular use would have on such an important bend in the river, on these historic neighborhoods and on how effortful it would be for citizens to move from Woldenberg Park to this downriver park. (08) He noted that he was not sure of exactly why but that Mr. Jim Bridger who leads the Public Belt Railroad did not support the Cold Storage location here. (09) Mr. Cummings concluded by saying again that folks should express their views, views of support or not, to to the Port and to their elected officials because that is what active citizens do in this nation. He said that the NOBC likes the idea of an active wharf, just not this particular use because the social costs seem to outweigh the social benefits when viewed overall not through the more narrow calculation of private costs and benefits that the Port makes by itself. He stated that NOBC would make sure the topic was raised at the next meeting and that NOBC would notify the Port of not only tonight's conversation but of the next meeting so it could better answers the questions raised like those tonight.

The meeting adjourned.