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COMMENTARY: St. Bernard projects overhaul has solid potential

by Mark Singletary

The old St. Bernard public housing projects were located three blocks from City Park. By any measurement, St. Bernard residents didn't regularly use park facilities. That should change dramatically if local developers have their way.

The Bayou District Foundation is the lead development partner for the former St. Bernard Housing Community. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Housing Authority of New Orleans picked them for the job in 2007. The foundation broke ground on its first St. Bernard area housing project, Colombia Park, in December.

Colombia Park is the initial phase of a master-planned community within the St. Bernard complex that will feature mixed-use commercial and mixed-income residential buildings.

But the foundation has grander plans than just some innovative replacement for the old St. Bernard public housing projects.

Following a master plan similar to one that's worked out well for developers and residents in Atlanta, the foundation wants to see the City Park golf courses redeveloped and an economic commitment to the surrounding area.

East Lake development in Atlanta was a rundown mess just a few years ago. Very much like our pre-Katrina public housing communities, East Lake had high crime and was highly avoidable real estate for anyone with good sense and the ability to live and work someplace else.

A visionary changed all that. With bold plans and lots of money, an Atlanta-area developer named Tom Cousins set out to make East Lake work as a real mixed-use community.

What Cousins and the other developers had going for them was an old golf course, amazingly called the East Lake Golf Club. East Lake is where Bobby Jones learned to play golf. Bobby Jones was the Tiger Woods of his day — the 1920s — and it was a romantic notion to resurrect his old golf club.

East Lake developers raised money from the business community to make the golfing part of their development plans financially sound. Corporate sponsorships to the golf club were offered for several hundred thousand dollars apiece and they sold out. This money was used to seed the East Lake area's economic redevelopment.

The club also arranged for the annual PGA Tour Championship to be played on the historic course, and that commitment from the pros gave the development credibility.

Opportunity is the key to the East Lake plan. Opportunity for families to have nice homes, good schools and recreational facilities for their children is the basis of their success.

The Bayou District Foundation board wants the same for its New Orleans project.

The challenge, as always, is the money.

Money to build mixed-income housing has been found and is being spent. Money to develop a retail corridor, build new schools, move a youth prison and rebuild the City Park golf courses is officially being pursued.

We need City Park golf courses. We need City Park golf courses to be good golf courses. We need City Park golf courses to be challenging, aesthetically pleasing, reasonably priced and opened as soon as possible.

The existing golf facilities at City Park consist of a reworked 18-hole North Course, a very old, very seedy practice facility with dreams for the future.

The Bayou District Foundation golf plans include new practice and clubhouse facilities — and Rees Jones.

Jones, noted golf course designer and architect of the East Lake course resurrection, is on board to work his magic at City Park. He walked the old courses last summer and has been working on plans to frustrate amateur golfers since then.

All of these plans seem forward thinking. But none of this matters unless the families that choose to make that Colombia Park and other neighborhoods within the footprint of the old St. Bernard projects are safe and accessible to City Park and its programs.

Junior golf, nature trails, day-care facilities and programmed activities for the children who live so close to the park are intriguing benefits of the Bayou District area. The fact no one recognized this importance during the time the St. Bernard projects were full of residents is maddening.

Projects like this are really important if we ever want to think of ourselves as progressive. It will help with the opinion held by outsiders, as well. There's nothing wrong with doing well and doing good at the same time. •

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