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## Demolition begins at St. Bernard complex; HANO says three of the "Big Four" tumbling down

by Gwen Filosa, The Times-Picayune

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Demolition crews began tearing down the aging brick buildings that comprise the sprawling St. Bernard public housing development in Gentilly today, the first major razing of the city's four largest complexes set for complete redevelopment after Hurricane Katrina struck.

Work crews were busy at the St. Bernard, located off St. Bernard Avenue. They chucked furniture and personal belongings left behind in the apartments after most of New Orleans fled from the flood-ravaged city.

"These buildings were obsolete," said Karen Cato-Turner, executive director of the Housing Authority of New Orleans, which has been run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development since 2002. "It was a failing system. The housing authority had been investing millions into the developments for repairs."

HANO announced in June 2006 that it would tear down the "Big Four" complexes - St. Bernard, Lafitte, C.J. Peete and B.W. Cooper - to make way for modern-day neighborhoods that include people of all income levels.

But obstacles that included lawsuits, the city's rash of copper theft, protesters and the required bureaucratic maneuvers - such as having to win the City Council's approval to begin demolition, kept the bulldozers from rolling in, HANO officials said today.

HANO still has a civil rights lawsuit pending at federal court, but Cato-Turner said the litigation cannot prevent the agency from proceeding with its sweeping plans to transform New Orleans' public housing into modern-day neighborhoods that include apartments and homes built for subsidized and market-rate rentals.

The citywide reconstruction of public housing is due for completion by December 2010, with about 3,000 public housing homes available. Housing vouchers, known as "Section 8" and "Tenant Protection Vouchers" will enable HANO families to rent in the private market while construction takes place, said HANO.

"All of our families are protected, every one," said Donald Babers, HANO's one-man board of commissioners, who was appointed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Development after Katrina. "We do not have people sleeping under the bridge or that kind of thing. That is a misnomer."

Unless a tenant has violated HANO regulations or was not on the lease to begin with, Babers said, he or she has access to case management services and help paying for U-Haul moving trucks and bus tickets back to New Orleans.

HANO has cut more than 4,600 "disaster relocation checks" since Katrina, a total of \$4 million, for such services, Babers said.

As of 3 p.m., 175 apartments in two buildings at St. Bernard had been reduced to rubble. Demolition on the first 14 buildings tagged for removal is expected to be completed by the end of March, said Cato-Turner.

HANO last fall approved a \$9 million contract for the demolition of 132 buildings at St. Bernard in an agreement with the developer, St. Bernard Redevelopment, LLC. HANO also approved \$645,000 for predevelopment expenses, with plans to build 465 rental units on the site. Demolition work has already started last month at B.W. Cooper and C. J. Peete, both in Central City. But the 175 apartments, in 14 buildings at Cooper, had already been approved for demolition before Katrina struck.

The fourth HANO development set for complete reconstruction, Lafitte in the Treme, remains shuttered while HANO officials await the city's approval of the required demolition permits. Babers said the agency has agreed to create an "advisory board," at Mayor Ray Nagin's request. The mayor wants two people, a public housing resident and his own appointee, to serve on the non-voting board.

Babers said that the city's public housing stock had fallen into near-ruin before Katrina struck and the levees failed. Almost all of the apartments weren't up to building codes and wouldn't have passed government inspection standards post-Katrina, he said.

And the working-class families of New Orleans deserve better than the dilapidated apartments that lacked basic amenities of modern living. For example, the traditional barracks-style apartments had window unit air conditioning and lacked the proper wiring to install central air.

Renovation of the storm-damaged developments wasn't an option financially, Babers said, and the families who depend on HANO for housing deserve better.

"Look at the old Fisher, the old Guste," Babers said, in an interview today at the HANO offices in Gentilly. "Then look at the families in the new single-family type homes (at both Fischer and Guste). It's a world of difference in the way that they live."

Nonprofit developers plan to replace the Lafitte with "one-to-one" replacement of the 860 apartments home to families before Katrina struck. Within five months, HANO will re-open 94 temporary homes at Lafitte, as part of its commitment to welcome back any of the 5,100 families it served before the levee failures plunged the region into agony almost 2 1/2 years ago.

Today, HANO has re-populated its traditional housing developments with 1,825 families, the agency said today, with plans to repair an additional 1,000 apartments over the next several months. The Cooper has re-opened in sections since Katrina, but eventually HANO will allow a developer to tear down the brick buildings that flank Earhart Boulevard in favor of "mixed income" housing that will include public housing, low-income and market-rate rentals.

The Bayou District Foundation, formed earlier this year, acts as the public face of a complex partnership that includes the Fore!Kids Foundation and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, both established charities. An affiliate of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, Commercial Properties Development Corp., will manage commercial elements of the redeveloped St. Bernard site, while a for-profit Atlanta company, Columbia Residential, will develop the apartment complexes.

While they face criticism and questions from displaced St. Bernard residents, the Bayou District Foundation leaders don't face the wrenching prospect of relocating people. The more than 1,000

families living in the 52-acre complex before Katrina flooded the neighborhood are gone, and St. Bernard has remained shuttered since the immediate aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season.