

Unlocking 9th Ward worry

By opening an information office in a neighborhood worried about the impact of work planned for the Industrial Canal, the Port of New Orleans and the Army Corps of Engineers have made a substantial addition to the bridge they have built between government and the people it serves.

The office, recently opened in the Sanchez Center in the Lower 9th Ward, will serve as a clearinghouse for information about the proposed replacement of the canal lock. That proposal, which once included the displacement of more than 600 residents, sparked vehement opposition from a range of people, among them residents, preservationists and politicians.

The lock, the busiest in the nation, is also the sight of frequent towboat traffic tieups. The maritime industry, which has wanted to replace the lock for more than 30 years, had produced a plan for reaching that goal with little input from the community that would be affected.

Opponents of the \$500 million project feared the obvious loss of neighbors and property and the potential demolition of historic parts of the city. The Port and Corps decided in 1990 to "go back to square one," as Port President J. Ron Brinson said then, organizing a task force of community representatives and asking for direction on how next to proceed.

Though that process produced a plan acceptable to many, the concerns for the neighborhood persist and rumors still fester about the pending demolition of homes and dis-

placement of hundreds. Thus, the new office.

"There are people who still think those things will happen," said Patrick Gallway, director of planning and engineering for the Port. "The office is here because the community recommended it. This is another step in trying to get information out."

The Caffin Avenue office, financed by the Port and the Corps of Engineers, also will be a sounding board for those who still wish to influence the lock project, which is years away from startup.

What project organizers most want to know is how residents think traffic and neighborhood services will be affected by the lock work, Mr. Gallway said. With that information, he said, officials can prepare plans to mitigate those problems, plans that will be needed when the time comes to ask Congress for money to do the work.

"We want to hear from the community what those things are," Mr. Gallman said.

The office also will be the site of more public hearings and will provide brochures and, in the future, a video for those who still have questions about what will happen to their neighborhood, he said.

It's a valuable community service that goes beyond pure public relations. Port officials and the Corps of Engineers are not only constructing a good model for how to resolve conflict between people and progress, but a better model for how to reduce the chances that there will ever be conflict in the first place.