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Citizen Planning for Community Development in the Lower Ninth Ward

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**COLLEGE OF URBAN AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS
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Executive Summary

In the summer of 1995, Professor Mickey Lauria of the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of New Orleans (UNO) was contacted by representatives from All Congregations Together (ACT) and St. David's church about producing a community plan for a neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward. Dr. Lauria, Director of the Division of Urban Research and Policy Studies and a long-time advocate of community-based planning, enlisted the help of UNO research assistants Wendel Dufour and Patrick Haughey, who coordinated the mapping and database activities for a similar study of the Holy Cross Neighborhood. A series of meetings concentrating on the organizational and financial details of the project followed. Hibernia Bank agreed to finance the bulk of the project. St. David's contributed \$1,000 and Dr. Lauria secured a \$3,000 matching grant from the University of New Orleans.

The initial step was the creation of a land use and housing condition database using 'PicBase', an innovative picture/text database developed in the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of New Orleans. When installed at St. David's in early June, 1996, 'PicBase' will introduce a dynamic new weapon in the fight to revitalize the Lower Ninth Ward. Neighborhood organizations in the Lower Ninth Ward will have, on one computer, a high quality image of each of the 4,550 structures and vacant lots in their neighborhood, plus information on each structure's address, condition, land use, and vacancy status. This inventory will be invaluable in the revitalization of the neighborhood. Concurrent with the use of 'PicBase' was the creation of a geographic information system for spatial analysis and mapping of housing data from the U. S. Census.

Two community planning meetings were held allowing neighborhood residents and business, city, and institutional representatives an opportunity to come together to discuss current problems facing the neighborhood and their vision of the neighborhood for the next ten to twenty years. Both meetings were resounding successes, with more than 160 participants working together to plan their neighborhood twenty years into the future. Several student planners from UNO participated as moderators and note-takers during the small group discussions, then held a separate planning session to generate community planning recommendations for the neighborhood. The process culminated with Dr. Lauria returning to the neighborhood to present the results of the citizen planning process. This report was the basis for his presentation. This community now has a vision, but it is time for the leaders of this city to listen. As one resident said, "We can wish for these things. We can want these things..., but we need someone else to hear this." The following community development planning recommendations were produced by this process.

NEIGHBORHOOD GOALS AND PRIORITIES

A Community Development Corporation (CDC) strategy should be adopted to guide revitalization efforts. All community development organizations active in the Lower Ninth Ward should communicate and meet to brainstorm goals and objectives for the neighborhood. As a result of this meeting, a survey should be developed and administered to the neighborhood residents to prioritize the suggested goals. After the neighborhood surveys are received, another meeting should be held to interpret the

results. The prioritized goals and objectives should be officially adopted by the boards of all the locally active organizations in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Police Protection and Crime

A major concern voiced during the community planning meetings is the high crime level in the neighborhood. Residents identified several areas of the neighborhood as notorious for drug trafficking. **A community-wide committee of residents and business leaders should be formed to act as a liaison between the community and the Fifth District Police office to voice the concerns of the neighborhood.** Additionally, the following recommendations are made:

- Maintain the Fifth District substation on a 24-hour basis;
- Investigate implementing a community policing program similar to those used in public housing; and
- Neighborhood Watch areas should be organized in the neighborhood, and weekly meetings held to keep residents updated on criminal activity in their area.

Housing

In this neighborhood there are 363 abandoned structures, and another 464 identified as having major structural damage, many of which are occupied. Such a large number of deteriorated structures poses a tremendous challenge, organizationally and strategically, to those trying to improve the housing stock. **We recommend an organizational strategy utilizing Community Development Corporations to facilitate housing development.** As part of this strategy, St. David's should:

Coordinate their efforts with community development organizations active in the Lower Ninth Ward to ensure maximum efficiency in obtaining and

utilizing resources. The Lower Ninth Ward Community Plan will help continue the process of obtaining housing redevelopment funds from City, State, Federal, and private sector sources by demonstrating that the neighborhood has a unified vision and definite strategy to improve the housing stock.

A targeting approach is recommended to identify areas for housing development. Within identified target areas, micro-strategies should be employed to identify individual structures for different types of rehabilitation programs, i.e., acquisition and rehabilitation of abandoned properties, owner occupied rehabilitation, or investor rehabilitation programs. We recommend the following target areas:

Florida Avenue - St. Maurice Avenue - North Miro Street - Alabo Street

This area has one of the highest home ownership rates in the neighborhood, with a lower density of abandoned and dilapidated structures than is found in other areas. We recommend programs targeting owner occupied structures coupled with acquisition and rehabilitation of abandoned properties. Hardin Elementary School is located in this area and improving conditions could attract new homeowners with small children, further stabilizing this area.

North Galvez Street - Reynes Street - Tupelo Street - North Derbigny Street

This area is in the heart of the neighborhood, and includes a large concentration of abandoned and dilapidated structures. Residents identified this area as a 'hot spot' of criminal activity. A coordinated effort among community development organizations is needed to improve this area. Commercial revitalization of the Caffin Avenue/North Galvez Street intersection, coupled with housing rehabilitation is recommended.

Jourdan Avenue - Florida Avenue - Deslonde Street - Marais Street

This is a large corridor of abandoned and dilapidated homes near Tennessee Street, where some of the highest homeownership and housing values are found. The levee along Jourdan Avenue provides greenspace.

Jackson Barracks - Andry Street - North Robertson Street - Urquart Street

This area is unique because it is sandwiched between the two major vehicular arteries leading into and out of the neighborhood, St. Claude Avenue and North Claiborne Avenue, which are also the major commercial corridors serving the

neighborhood. These edges create a mini-neighborhood within the Lower Ninth Ward. Owner-occupied housing values are generally higher than in other areas of the neighborhood. The homeownership rate generally appears moderate, with high and low levels in some pockets. There are quite a number of abandoned and dilapidated structures. A strategy that combines owner-occupied rehabilitation with acquisition and rehabilitation of abandoned structures is recommended.

In addition to the organizational and targeting recommendations, we offer the following recommendations for on-going activities:

- Organize a housing committee to monitor the revitalization effort and disseminate information to residents about available housing programs;
- Obtain stricter code enforcement by the Office of Safety and Permits to bring some of the dilapidated properties into conformance with building codes; and
- Identify owners of all abandoned property, especially those living outside of the neighborhood or Orleans Parish.

Vacant Lots

Scattered throughout the neighborhood are 429 vacant lots and larger parcels of vacant land. In some respects, vacant lots are as big a problem as abandoned housing. Residents voiced numerous complaints about overgrown, trash-strewn lots throughout the neighborhood. While a problem, these lots create opportunity for infill development, increased open space, and larger lot sizes for property owners. The following recommendations are made to deal with this problem:

Infill Development

- Build new residential housing, both single and multi-family.

Increase Lot Sizes

- Cede ownership of vacant lots to adjacent property owners to increase the value of their property.

- Where possible, combine acquisition and rehabilitation of abandoned housing with adjacent vacant lots to create a more attractive sale property.

Increase Open Space

- Create community gardens, tot lots, or pocket parks throughout the neighborhood.
- Utilize large open tracts for large-scale community use. Open land on Florida Avenue is a potential site for a linear park, flea market, or gospel park. The levee along Jourdan Avenue has potential for open space development (contact Orleans Levee Board).

Commercial Development

A major need in the neighborhood is an increase in the number and scale of certain commercial and retail land uses. Currently, there is no large grocery servicing the neighborhood, which forces residents to drive across the canal or to St. Bernard to shop. This area lacks other commercial uses as well, such as chain restaurants, bank branches, and service sector retail. The following areas are recommended for increased commercial development:

North Claiborne Avenue

The area along North Claiborne Avenue is suited for large-scale commercial/retail development since the street is four-laned and can accommodate traffic associated with these types of uses. Currently, the area around North Claiborne Avenue and Lamanche Street is zoned commercial, and several blocks between Reynes and Lizardi Streets are zoned for business. A potential development is a mini strip mall anchored by a large supermarket.

Caffin Avenue Between North Prieur and North Tonti Streets

Caffin Avenue between North Prieur and North Tonti streets is currently zoned for business. This corridor is centrally located within the neighborhood and is bisected by the North Galvez Street bus line. We suggest service oriented small businesses such as a bank or credit union, laundromat, post office, coffee shop, or a small locally owned restaurant.

St. Claude Avenue

St. Claude Avenue is the major commercial/retail corridor in the area, and is zoned commercial between St. Bernard Parish and Tennessee Street. Public transportation makes this area accessible to outlying areas on the neighborhood's northern edge. Despite these advantages, St. Claude Avenue suffers from the uncertainty of the Port of New Orleans' expansion of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal. This project could close the St. Claude Ave. Bridge for three years, or possibly longer. This closure could devastate commercial activity along St. Claude Avenue. These uncertainties make it difficult to attract larger commercial ventures to St. Claude Avenue. We recommend smaller commercial activities such as retail food outlets, or small retail/service activities.

Community Space

A concern of the residents is the lack of recreational facilities for children. One option is building a community center on the site of the old Lawless Elementary School. This center could serve as a recreational facility for children and adults, as well as a meeting space for neighborhood events. **In addition, we recommend forging an alliance between the neighborhood and the New Orleans Recreation Department to increase organized recreational activities in the area.**

Access to medical care is a problem in the neighborhood as well. Residents are not happy with the current hours or services available at the clinic located in the neighborhood, and there is no emergency medical facility on this side of the canal in Orleans Parish. The closest hospital is in St. Bernard Parish. **We recommend maintaining the clinic on a 24-hour basis and expanding the clinic's capacity to treat trauma cases.**

A needs assessment is recommended to determine the scope of other social service needs in the neighborhood.

Infrastructure

Many complaints were raised concerning problems with drainage, street conditions, and sidewalks. Specific drainage problems, along North Galvez Street for instance, were noted on some of the small group maps (see community map). Several recommendations are made to deal with these problems.

- Establish a committee of neighborhood residents to keep track of street and drainage problems in the neighborhood.
- Create a map detailing street and drainage conditions throughout the neighborhood.
- Meet with City Officials to discuss street and drainage conditions and a time frame for addressing these problems, and to give them a copy of the map detailing the problems.