

Panel backs work force housing

Nonprofit plans affordable units

By **Charlie Chapple**
St. Tammany bureau

A nonprofit organization is proposing to build a new neighborhood of "affordable work force housing" on 15 acres at the boundary of northern Covington.

Renaissance Development Corp., a subsidiary of the New Orleans chapter of Volunteers of America, is planning the subdivision of 35 single-family homes and 94 rental units on wooded acreage south of Polders Lane, east of 29th Avenue and at the western ends of 30th and 31st avenues.

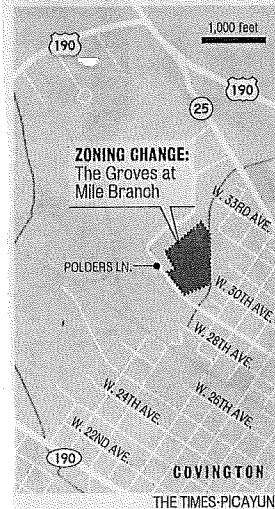
The new neighborhood, called The Groves at Mile Branch, would provide needed affordable housing for "people essential to the economy of St. Tammany Parish," such as firefighters, teachers, clerical workers and law enforcement officers, according to Victor Smeltz, executive director of Renaissance Development.

Smeltz told the parish Zoning

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Residents voice flooding concerns



AFFORDABLE, from A-1

Commission on Tuesday night that the 15-acre site is ideal for the new neighborhood because it is within walking distance of downtown Covington, schools, the post office and stores.

He asked for and got the commission's positive recommendation to rezone the acreage from Suburban Agriculture to Planned Unit Development. The recommendation goes to the Parish Council for final approval.

Plans show that the 94 rental homes would be in six duplexes, two triplexes, 13 four-plexes and 3 eight-plexes around a park and community center.

Monthly rents would range from \$588 to \$700 for one-bedroom units, \$706 to \$801 for two-bedroom units, and \$816 to

\$900 for three-bedroom units, Smeltz said. The single-family homes would be in the \$150,000 to \$160,000 range, he said.

Maureen Clary, president and chief executive officer for Habitat for Humanity St. Tammany West, said the organization plans to buy some of the single-family lots for its housing program.

Two nearby residents urged the commission to deny the rezoning request. Earl Hellmers, a Polders Lane resident, said the development is too dense, would aggravate traffic problems and is being proposed for a flood-prone area. The site is partially bordered by Mile Branch, which floods frequently during heavy rains, he said.

Sheila Page, a resident of nearby West 29th Avenue, agreed.

"Every time it rains, you can't see the street for the water," she said.

Former Covington Mayor Keith Villere, consultant for the project, said homes near Mile Branch would be raised. The development also would have a drainage system to reduce runoff from the site, he said.

Covington Mayor Candace Watlins supported the development, saying it is next to one of the city's most blighted neighborhoods, which the city has been working to improve.

"This project can be a wonderful addition for this neighborhood," she said. "This is a shot in the arm for this neighborhood."

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