



Everything New Orleans

# The Times-Picayune

## Apartment plans stall after uproar

### Group may redesign riverfront project

Wednesday, January 28, 2009

**By Bruce Egger**

**Staff writer**

A local subsidiary of the Volunteers of America has dropped plans for a high-rise apartment building in the 1700 block of Tchoupitoulas Street that had drawn fire from residents of the nearby Coliseum Square neighborhood.

The 210-unit, 150-foot-high complex would have included more than 80 units for the working poor.

Faced with continuing neighborhood opposition and City Councilwoman Stacy Head's refusal to support the \$46 million project, the Renaissance Neighborhood Development Corp. withdrew its proposal, which was awaiting City Council action. The site is in Head's district.

Victor Smeltz, executive director of the Volunteers of America subsidiary, said his group has not given up on building such a complex, but he said it could be a year or two before it is ready to present a new proposal.

By that time, Head could be out of office, the city could have a new master plan and zoning ordinance, and the financial crisis that makes it hard to raise money for major real-estate projects could have eased.

"We still believe it's a very important project," Smeltz said. "We will look at other development options," including reducing the number of units and the height and revising the design.

Renaissance bought the 2-acre site in 2008 for about \$3.2 million. It includes the entire block on the river side of Tchoupitoulas between Celeste and Nuns streets.

The developers planned to demolish two commercial or industrial buildings on the site but to restore a 19th-century building once used as a cotton press.

The first phase of the project would have included a 14-story, 150-unit apartment building, plus 13,000 square feet of commercial space. A second phase would have added a five-story, 60-unit residential building and another 18,000 square feet of commercial space.

Forty percent of the apartments would have been reserved for people making less than 60 percent of the area's median income. The rest would have been rented at market rates.

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Volunteers of America President Jim LeBlanc said the project would help the charitable organization reach its goal of replacing 1,000 units of housing for elderly, low-income and special-needs people that were lost in Hurricane Katrina.

However, Coliseum Square Association leaders challenged several aspects of the project, including the number of units, the design and especially the height of the main building.

Although the site's zoning would allow a building as high as 200 feet, the critics said they don't want a high-rise building on the riverfront near their houses.

President Andrew Yon said the Coliseum Square Association does not object to affordable housing in the Lower Garden District, but that a high-rise building would tower over a planned riverfront park and would set a precedent for other large-scale developments along the river.

Although the City Planning Commission staff endorsed the project, the commission voted 6-0 to recommend that the council reject it. Head said she was not prepared to support the proposal as long as the immediate neighborhood opposed it.

Smeltz said Renaissance decided it needed more community support and Head's backing to push the proposal to a vote at the council. But he said the organization will continue trying to construct mixed-income housing around New Orleans.

"It's been a wild ride, but we're here for the long haul," he said.

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