

Future unclear for base on river - Site could become park, residential area

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Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA)-August 6, 2007

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It's 25.3 acres of prime New Orleans riverfront real estate that many New Orleanians have rarely -- if ever -- seen, but it could become a focus of controversy in the next few years.

It's the Naval Support Activity-East Bank, the tract at the downriver end of Bywater between Poland Avenue and the Industrial Canal that has been home to a succession of military organizations and activities since 1919. Many locals still refer to it as the Port of Embarkation, recalling its role as an Army deployment hub during World War II.

With the site's current tenants, the Naval Reserve and Marine Corps Reserve commands, due to move out by 2011, the Department of Defense has declared the base surplus, leaving its future use uncertain.

A group of consultants working for the New Orleans Building Corp., a city agency, recently suggested leveling the base's military buildings and turning the site into a park. But the "Reinventing the Crescent" planners also suggested the park would be an ideal site for several mid- and high-rise residential buildings.

That idea has aroused the ire of some Bywater residents, who say such buildings would be out of place in a historic neighborhood. Other residents are more receptive to the idea.

Separately, a cooperative endeavor agreement signed last year by the city and the Port of New Orleans committed each party "to use its best efforts" to acquire the site as part of a broader effort to redevelop river wharves no longer needed for maritime use.

The port wants to use part of the site to provide parking for a cruise ship terminal that port officials have talked about building nearby. The city would be free to redevelop the rest of the site for whatever uses it wants.

Workshop on process

But before any decisions on the site's future ownership and use can be made, federal law mandates a complex planning process that includes, among other things, soliciting proposals for use of all or part of the site by organizations that work with the homeless and other public interest groups.

A workshop Friday to explain the process to such organizations attracted about 40 to 50 people, said Belinda Little-Wood, executive director of the New Orleans Advisory Task Force, the group charged by law with overseeing the development of plans for reusing the site.

As explained to those attending the workshop, the site contains three six-floor office buildings totaling 1.6 million square feet, including 1 million square feet of air-conditioned office space. The base also offers 1,800 parking spaces, including 1,100 spaces in one of the three buildings, plus several recreational facilities: a track, two basketball courts, a tennis court, a volleyball pit, three racquetball courts and a parade ground.

The base was built in 1919 for the Army Quartermaster Corps. During World War II, it was designated the New Orleans Port of Embarkation. It functioned as an Army base until 1966, when it was transferred to the Navy and became known as the Naval Support Activity.

With the Naval Reserve Command expected to move to Norfolk, Va., in 2009 and the Marine Reserve Command scheduled to move across the river to the planned "federal city" complex in 2010 or 2011, the Bywater site will be available for redevelopment for governmental, public or private uses.

The city has been officially designated the "local redevelopment authority" in charge of deciding what should happen to the site, though the process is subject to federal review. Mayor Ray Nagin created the Advisory Task Force to make recommendations to him and the City Council on how the site should be redeveloped.

The group's members represent City Hall, the University of New Orleans, the Regional Planning Commission, the Industrial Development Board, the Port of New Orleans, the Algiers Economic Development Foundation, the Bywater Neighborhood Association, the Chamber of Commerce and the New Orleans Federal Alliance, the group steering the effort to create the "federal city."

'Forward-thinking'

Little-Wood said the task force's responsibility is to develop a plan that can enhance the local economy, increase local tax revenues, create jobs, preserve the city's character and embrace the principles of the Unified New Orleans Plan and other recovery planning efforts.

The goal, she said, is a "forward-thinking, business-minded redevelopment plan that will make use of all available resources; create opportunities for the city as a whole and the immediate neighborhoods in particular; and involve businesses, civic and residential communities."

To some Bywater residents, Little-Wood's talk about the need for "a financially feasible, economically viable development" suggests the site inevitably will be made available to private developers.

But Little-Wood said federal law requires the task force to balance the desire for economic development with other priorities, such as meeting the needs of the homeless. The local group must be able to show the Department of Housing and Urban Development that it has given "substantial consideration" to the homeless, not just "lip service," she said. "We must give everything fair consideration."

Before Friday's workshop, she said, she contacted all the local groups providing services to the homeless that are listed with Unity for the Homeless, a collaborative of nonprofits and governmental agencies.

Homeless service providers have until Nov. 30 to present formal proposals for using part of the site. The Advisory Task Force must submit its recommendations to HUD and the Defense Department by Aug. 26, 2008, and Little-Wood said she wants to get them to the mayor and council for their review by June 2.

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For information about the task force and federal guidelines for planning the redevelopment of surplus military bases, visit the city's Web site, [www.cityofno.com](http://www.cityofno.com), and type "noatf" in the "Search City Pages" box.

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STAFF FILE PHOTO

The Naval Support Activity-East Bank, shown in the 1960s, is sometimes still referred to as the Port of Embarkation. It served as an Army deployment hub in World War II, and was transferred to the Navy in 1966. [3445896]

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