

Minutes of MCNO Recovery Action Meeting: April 2, 2007

Held 6:30PM-8PM at Grace Episcopal Church

Several hundred people attended the meeting including Councilmember Shelley Midura and her staff and representatives from Councilman-at-Large Fielkow's office.

COMISKY PARK COMMUNITY CENTER UPDATE

Brenda Napolitano of the MCNO Green Space Committee explained that plans for the new center have been reviewed by MCNO and they are "right on the mark" as far as what was requested by residents. Groundbreaking is expected sometime in June. This had to be pushed back from when it was originally scheduled in April because of the time involved in the permitting process. Regarding having a police substation in the Center, NOPD has said that, unfortunately, they cannot staff a substation in the Center but agreed that an office in the Center where police could write up reports and take breaks would be useful.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE UPDATE

Michael Homan, Chair of MCNO's Education Committee, discussed the "State of NOLA Schools Project" (www.stateofnolaschools.org) which is trying to engage the public in creating "an immediately actionable plan to raise student achievement for all public school students in New Orleans." Michael said he has gone to meetings for this project and has found that elected officials seem to really be listening to residents ideas and desires about education for the first time. He thanked Shelley Midura for her support of this project and urged everyone to go to the project's website and take the survey available there. Michael also announced that a new New Orleans Public Library branch will be opening in Mid City in mid-May. This announcement was met by applause.

SECURITY & CRIME PREVENTION COMMITTEE

Angela Brenneke explained that she is working on getting a security district in Mid City (a process that takes about 1 1/2 years) and asked those who are interested in helping to contact her. Clay Lattimer, Committee Chair, announced that a purse-snatcher, thought to be responsible for over 20 crimes in the area, was caught last week.

PROPOSED RETAIL DEVELOPMENT FOR MID CITY

This section of the meeting included two presentations followed by audience comments.

Bart Everson, Chair of MCNO's Communications Committee and also Chairman of the Friends of Lafitte Corridor ("FOLC") Board made the first presentation. He conveyed regrets from Daniel Samuels, FOLC President, who was unable to attend the meeting. Then he briefly explained the Lafitte Corridor Greenway project which is planned to run through the tract of Mid City land being proposed for retail development. It will be a 3-mile bike path, walkway and greenway running from Armstrong Park to Canal Boulevard. \$400,000 has already been raised for constructing the greenway and the Brown+Danos design firm is working pro bono on its design. Currently a City Council Task Force is being put together to advise the City Council on the project. Bart cited studies of similar projects in Austin and Indianapolis showing that property values rise near greenways.

Jennifer Weishaupt, MCNO's Vice-President and Chair of the MCNO Economic Development Committee make the second presentation which outlined what we know about the Mid City development proposed by Victory Real Estate Investments, LLC. In her introduction, Jennifer explained that this meeting would be only the FIRST of MANY meetings about this development so people should understand their input can make a difference. She also explained that her presentation would present the facts as MCNO understands them; and would focus on how the proposed retail development fits with Mid City's neighborhood planning documents.

Phase I of the project covers the area from Jefferson Davis to Carrollton and from Bienville to Toulouse. The Mid City Center and the Gambit building are excluded. Victory already owns the Save-A-Center and Home Depot in this tract.

Phase II covers Carrollton to N. Solomon and Bienville to St. Louis St. - i.e. the area we know as Bohn Ford, the Harry's Ace strip shopping center & Loubat Glass.

Our Vision

To frame the discussion, Jennifer read this vision statement generated by Mid City residents which became part of the Lambert Plan for the Mid City Neighborhood:

... the community envisions a neighborhood where people of all races and economic backgrounds can find and enjoy a high quality of life together and find opportunities for meaningful employment and home ownership. The community will be rebuilt upon the same urban framework that existed prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Jennifer pointed out that to be "rebuilt upon the same urban framework" precludes the sale of streets (i.e. allowing developers to buy and close streets and build on the rights-of-way).

Our Goals

Goals from the Mid City plan are:

- A safe neighborhood that allows for walking and biking with plentiful green space
- Mixed-use buildings with appropriate locally-owned businesses...
- That the historic character of the neighborhood be preserved while expanding modern amenities

Jennifer called for a show of hands supporting these goals and there was an overwhelming show of support.

Specifics – Carrollton Avenue

Per the plan, "...commercial redevelopment (especially throughout the Carrollton Avenue commercial corridor) will be focused on walkability, street-side storefronts and neighborhood-friendly businesses."

Specifics – Industrial Corridor

Per the plan, "Development of the warehouse area adjacent to the linear park [i.e. the Lafitte Corridor Greenway] with mixed use opportunities including multi-family housing, retail facilities, art studios and exhibit space...plazas , seats, landscaping and lighting."

At this point, Jennifer asked the audience "Are you in support of the ideas, goals and visions we outlined in our neighborhood plan as presented here?" and the response was an overwhelming show of support.

Background

Jennifer explained the timeline of MCNO's contacts to date with Victory Real Estate. This corrected some inaccuracies in Saturday's Times-Picayune story on the proposed development.

- October, 2006 - rumors of a Walmart coming to N. Carrollton
- Nov 13, 2006 - initial meeting with Victory
Attending: MCNO's Economic Development Committee and MCNO's Commercial Zoning Chair
Victory said their plans were for a "Lifestyle Center with a residential component" and that a department store which wanted to return to New Orleans was a possible tenant. (Jennifer said this was thought to be Macy's.) Plans brought to the meeting by Victory indicated that the development faced in towards Conti and St. Louis streets with a residential component around the outside facing Bienville, Jefferson Davis and Toulouse. At this point, Victory indicated that no property had been acquired.
- March 1, 2007 - 2nd meeting with Victory
Attending: MCNO, FOLC, Urban Conservancy, Victory and its land use lawyer from Jones, Walker
Victory provided new plans ("Plan B") which was considerably different from its original drawings and included: a residential wrap on Bienville, Toulouse and Jefferson Davis and several big box stores facing Conti from Jefferson Davis to N. Scott. (190K square foot Target, 80K Dick's Sporting Goods, (unknown size) Best Buy, 30K Bed, Bath & Beyond) Two blocks of surface parking between Conti & St. Louis with about 900 spaces was included and total estimated parking spaces were 2500+.

At this point, Jennifer asked the audience "Are you in support of the project exactly as proposed at this time?" and she was answered by a resounding NO!

Gaining Councilmembers Support for the Neighborhood

- o Initial Meeting - March 9 included representatives of Councilmembers Midura, Head and Fielkow; a representative of the City Planning Commission; and representatives from MCNO, FOLC and the Urban Conservancy. A Victory representative attended and showed two versions of plans. Councilmember Midura has responded by saying that the neighborhood's plans will be respected and the neighborhood must be engaged in the development process.

Jennifer stated that, at this point, MCNO is agreed on these minimum requirements for the project:

1. no sale of right-of-ways (i.e. no street closures)
2. no turning lanes on Carrollton, Bienville or Jefferson Davis
3. no tax incentives (TIFFS, etc.) - The economic success of the project needs to be generated by the project itself and not built on the backs of small, local businesses and residents. (APPLAUSE)

Engaging Victory

- o Victory asked last Thursday for our input
 - Must-haves
 - Must not haves
 - Like to haves
- o Victory says they will make a presentation to the community when they are further along in the process

Others Engaged to Date by MCNO

- o Friends of Lafitte Corridor
- o Urban Conservancy & Stay Local
- o Dr. Jake Wagner, Professor of Urban Planning at U of Missouri KC
- o Preservation Resource Center
- o National Trust for Historic Preservation

We are also trying to get a land use lawyer involved, who will hopefully provide pro bono assistance.

Councilmember Shelley Midura

At this point, Jennifer paused to give Councilmember Shelley Midura time to speak. Here is a summary of what the Councilmember said:

After congratulation Mid City on its new soon-to-open library branch she said "You elected me; Victory did not." (APPLAUSE) She said she does not make secret deals and will not do something outside of what the community wants. We need to come up with a "shared vision", she said, and asked that she be seen as the community's partner in this work.

Councilmember Midura explained that New Orleans's "big box ordinance" requires the developer to come to the table and deal with the Council. She said nothing is set in stone at this time; the developer's ideas are only concepts. She also mentioned her recent trip to Pittsburg with Councilmembers Fielkow and Head where they saw some exciting urban redevelopment and got ideas for guiding investment in New Orleans.

Midura said that she hears us saying "No big box; no strip mall". She suggests that we create a design review team like the one which, on behalf of the Northwest Carrollton neighborhood, guided the design of the Walgreens & Roberts to be built at Carrollton & Claiborne, a battle which she feels the neighborhood largely won. She promised her office will be "deeply engaged" on the Victory project. She also said she feels that it is a positive development that anyone "big" wants to invest in our community. We should say to them: "Thank you. Now come do it OUR WAY."

Jennifer Weishaupt continued her presentation by explaining that "as far as we understand it", no property has yet changed hands for this deal. But the developer is going to closing on Lindy Boggs in mid- to late-April. Zoning changes will be necessary to carry out their plans so they will have to go before the City Planning Commission and the City Council. We want to be clear with Victory about our demands BEFORE they buy any property since this is the fair way to proceed.

Qualities of Successful Urban Retail

Jennifer then showed a slide listing the following qualities of successful urban retail redevelopments:

- walkable blocks of 200 to 300 feet
- higher densities
- pedestrian-scaled architecture and amenities
- careful articulation of individual storefronts or buildings
- wide sidewalks and public plazas
- easy access to public transportation
- appears to have been developed over different periods of time
- mixture of uses

She said the qualities listed in the slide matches the type of development specified in the Mid City plan.

She announced that MCNO would shortly put a survey on its website (www.mcno.org) to allow everyone in the community to express their opinion on the proposed development (just in case we could not hear everyone's comments at the current meeting).

Then she opened the floor to comments from the audience.

Audience Comments (A collection of comments are listed here; names were usually not given so most comments are not attributed to a particular person. Answers provided by Jennifer Weishaupt are marked "JW")

- Lindy Boggs owner also owns property on the Liuzza's side of Bienville. What are they planning to do with it? JW understands they plan to put single- or double- residences there.
- What is Victory's proposed timeframe? JW said April is the 1st acquisition of property; ground-breaking at end of 2007; completion of construction at end of 2008.
- What about the possibility of getting Lindy Boggs to reopen as a medical facility. JW says she understands that when Ochsner refused to buy Lindy Boggs they negotiated a deal with Tenet that there would be no medical use in the building for 5 years and that if medical use is contemplated, Ochsner would have first right of refusal to open there.
- A resident from the 3900 block of Toulouse explained that existing delivery truck traffic (serving Save-A-Center and Home Depot) on the street is causing cracks in her home. She asked if there are any laws or ordinances protecting structures in historic districts from this type of traffic.
- Owner of Bayou Coffee House said she did not want competition from a Food Court in the proposed development. JW said she had told Victory, "Don't talk to me about national food chains; we have wonderful food here."
- Shouldn't infrastructure be fixed before anything is built on top of it?
- There is a difference between "convenience retail" (which serves the surrounding neighborhoods) and "destination retail" which is meant to attract people from much farther away. The Victory plan is for "destination retail". Instead, we should focus on "walkability and convenience to residents". (APPLAUSE)
- What is our objective? To stop it or accept it in some form? What are our options? JW: This is only the first meeting. We have options.
- What about biomed in the Lindy Boggs area? JW: Our plan says we want development on a smaller scale than biomed companies would be. We support biomed development slated for Tulane Ave.
- Development, if done right, can be a tremendous asset. (APPLAUSE) We need employment even if it just teaches young people minimum skills of coming to work on time, etc. We need retail. Right now, "you can't buy a shirt" in the area.
- I am concerned about pollution brought on by the development. They should be forced to pay the cost of cleanup of litter and of security.
- "I think a big box development will ruin the neighborhood." Sign my petition at gopetition.com to say no big box".
- Even before Katrina we had trouble keeping anchors. And now Jefferson Parish, which a much larger population than it had pre-Katrina has lost anchors in Esplanade Mall. Other national chain developments (Albertson's in Central City and at Jefferson Davis and Tulane) have failed leaving us with empty buildings.
- Let developers replace the streets their trucks destroy.

- But what about the houses they destroy?
- I am not opposed to retail in Mid City but am concerned about pollution. Save-A-Center is full of litter.
- I don't want the traffic volume of a development that will have 2500 parking spaces.
- After choosing to return and rebuild after Katrina, I feel that [if the developers get their way] my options are to either move to the French Quarter or to leave New Orleans.
- A "Healthy Families Clinic" including a pediatrician, ob-gyn and a dentist as well as other health-care services is seeking space in Mid City. There are options in addition to retail that can serve the community in the space Victory wants to develop.
- Dana Eness, Director of Stay Local! (a project of the Urban Conservancy), drew attention to the new Mid City business brochure. She also suggested everyone look at www.bigboxtoolkit.com and other links on the staylocal.org website to learn what their options are. She said we should not be put on the defensive because "responsible economics" and "responsible growth" are on our side.
- As opposed to being on the offensive, could we go on the offensive by buying the land proposed for this development?
- I am angry that only one neighborhood organization was contacted by the developers. What about the others? JW: MCNO was NOT contacted by Victory. We heard rumors from property owners who had been approached by Victory and put a lot of effort into tracking them down and arranging to meet. Victory was trying to keep their interests private and it was luck that MCNO found out about what they were doing.
- With economic development efforts at Carrollton and I-10, in New Orleans East and in other spots, can we really support them all? Can Victory's plans really be accommodated if we insist on no street closures?

Minutes provided by Janet Ward Pease, MCNO Secretary
April 3, 2007