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Judge OKs accord in housing bias suit

St. Bernard to pay up, but admits no fault

Friday, February 29, 2008

St. Bernard bureau

A federal judge on Thursday approved a settlement ending a fair-housing group's lawsuit against St. Bernard Parish over a 2006 ordinance restricting rental homes.

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The parish agreed to pay \$32,500 in damages but admitted no wrongdoing in the settlement approved by U.S. District Judge Ginger Berrigan.

The lawsuit by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center targeted a September 2006 ordinance prohibiting homes to be rented to anyone who was not a blood relative of the owner without Parish Council approval.

Council members had said the ordinance, which applied only to single-family homes that had not been rented before Hurricane Katrina, was intended to protect property values by preventing developers from buying tracts of flooded homes, making minimal repairs and turning them into cheap rentals.

Noting that St. Bernard's pre-Katrina population was about 93 percent white, some fair-housing advocates said the ordinance would largely exclude nonwhites from renting in the parish in violation of the federal Fair Housing Act.

The council removed the nonrelative clause in December 2006, amending the ordinance to require Parish Council approval of all rentals of single-family homes that had not been rentals before the hurricane.

The settlement calls for the Fair Housing Action Center to get \$20,000 and for Wallace Rodrigue, a parish landowner who challenged the ordinance in the group's lawsuit, to receive \$12,500.

The agreement also requires the parish to provide the Fair Housing Action Center with copies of all applications for rental home permits.