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Housing Battle Reveals Post-Katrina Tensions

By [CAMPBELL ROBERTSON](#)

CHALMETTE, La. — The parish of St. Bernard, a quiet, insular suburb just east of New Orleans, has in the end agreed to allow housing for low-income families.

But even though it is only a few hundred apartment units, it had to be ordered by a federal judge. The parish has fought desperately to prevent such housing and an influx of renters, at one point even approving a law that prohibited homeowners from renting to anyone other than a blood relative, before it was challenged and repealed.

The battle over low-income housing has been one of the most bitter that anyone in the middle-class, mostly white parish can remember, one that has stoked issues the region has been grappling with since [Hurricane Katrina](#): anger at the federal government and long-simmering class and racial tensions.

It also reflects widespread anxiety about just how drastically the area changed after the floodwaters receded.

“I think people have adopted this issue as one that goes far beyond the reality of its impact,” said Craig Taffaro Jr., the parish president. “It tapped into the soul of our recovery.”

Providing housing for low-income families has been one of the most vexing problems for the New Orleans area in the four years since the hurricane. Tens of thousands of homes, many of them dilapidated, are still vacant. But, in part because the houses that were destroyed were disproportionately for low-income renters, market rents in the city are 35 percent higher than they were before the storm, out of the reach of much of the city’s work force.

The demolition of the four big public housing complexes in New Orleans in 2007 and the approaching end to storm-related federal assistance programs have made these problems more critical, and their solutions more contentious.

That is particularly true in the case of St. Bernard, perhaps the jurisdiction hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina. Nearly every one of the 26,000 houses there was severely damaged or destroyed. Ninety-three percent of them were owned by whites.

Four years later, over half of the parish residences are still vacant or unoccupied, according to the [Greater New Orleans Community Data Center](#). The population, at around 37,000, is just more than half of what it was. Many former residents sold their homes to investors. Thousands of people displaced from elsewhere have moved in.

The parish has not welcomed these changes.

In September 2006, the Parish Council passed a law that prohibited owners of single-family residences from renting to anyone except blood relatives, except by special approval by the Council.

Parish officials say it was intended to guarantee that neighborhoods would consist largely of owner-occupied homes, with some accommodation for current residents.

But advocates for low-income housing say it was a blatantly racist policy, given the overwhelmingly white ownership in the parish. St. Bernard officials dropped the ordinance after a lawsuit by the [Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center](#).

“It’s loaded in a way no one can miss,” said John Relman, a civil rights lawyer who represented the center in the suit, adding that he had never come across such a rule before.

Then, last year, a Dallas-based firm called Realty Advisors proposed building four new apartment complexes, at \$60 million, in the parish. Thirty percent of the 288 apartments would be rented at market rates. The rest would be set aside for low-income renters.

Reaction among parish residents was swift. Amid grim forecasts of crime, ghettos and blight, parish officials declared a moratorium on building any apartment complexes with five or more units.

David Jarrell, an attorney for Sidney D. Torres III, one of the local backers of the apartments, said the anger came largely from an aversion to renters, even though a number of council members are landlords themselves.

And race, Mr. Jarrell said, was certainly a factor.

“It is what it is,” he said. “Anybody that says otherwise is being disingenuous.”

Parish officials denied that they were trying to keep out blacks, saying the parish simply needs more houses, not apartments. They said they would not object if the project involved filling up all the vacant lots already in the parish instead of building new high-density housing.

“It’s a very good idea if we needed it,” said Earl Dauterive, the chairman of the St. Bernard

planning commission. “We just don’t need it.”

Despite the fury the development has stirred up, no one — neither the opponents nor the supporters — knows what the likely racial makeup of the tenants would be, and it is possible that few black families would apply to live in the parish.

Race and class make for a complicated mix in this region. Proposed low- or mixed-income developments have met with staunch opposition all over the New Orleans area, in both predominately white suburbs and in primarily black neighborhoods in the city limits.

A development of 35 single-family, lease-to-own homes in the black middle-class neighborhood of New Orleans East was blocked by the New Orleans City Council in August. The arguments against it — that it would damage property values and quality of life — were similar to those heard in St. Bernard. The developer, a New Orleans native living in Atlanta, is [considering a discrimination lawsuit](#), even though almost everyone on both sides of the issue is black.

James Perry, executive director of the housing center and a candidate for mayor of New Orleans, said class animosity might be at the root of much of this anger, though discrimination against the poor is not a violation of the Fair Housing Act. It is illegal to discriminate against minorities, however, and given that a disproportionate number of those who need affordable housing in the area are black, he said, these arguments almost inevitably involve race.

Nowhere has the outcry against low-income housing been as intense as it has been in St. Bernard, particularly since Provident Realty took the parish to court this year. What followed was a season of acrimony, with parish officials doing everything possible to prevent the development from breaking ground. Construction has to begin by this fall if the developer is to qualify for the special disaster-relief tax credits that would make the development profitable.

At every turn, a federal judge in New Orleans has ruled that the parish’s actions were simply camouflaged racism and last month [ordered](#) that the parish move forward on the development or face steep daily fines. The parish is appealing her rulings.

Parish officials, already angered by what they see as a failure of the federal government to help them after Hurricane Katrina, were livid that a federal judge was now a force in their rebuilding. Mr. Taffaro, in a [weekly column](#) on the parish Web site, described the lawsuit “as a means to perpetuate the breakdown of true freedom of American society.”

At one hearing, a witness for Provident testified that a quarter of St. Bernard residents could not afford market rents. But even many of the parish’s poorest residents oppose the apartments.

“We don’t need it,” said Frances Graf, 48, a resident who bought a [FEMA](#) trailer from the

government for \$5 and who gathers daily with other residents at the food bank run by the Community Center of St. Bernard. "It's going to cause more problems. There ain't no jobs down here."

Those around her at the food bank agreed and said there was no shortage of "for rent" signs in the parish.

Then there was that other objection.

"You know what it's going to bring," said Kathy Gonzales, 55, who lives in a house owned by a relative of her husband and whose rent is subsidized by a Section 8 voucher. "I'm not going to say it, but you know."

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