

# Many whites oppose reviving some areas of New Orleans

## Poll indicates divide along racial lines

By Richard Fausset, Los Angeles Times | June 1, 2009

NEW ORLEANS - Nearly four years after Hurricane Katrina, it is the worry that will not fade, complicating the rebuilding of New Orleans and defining and reflecting this fragile city's racial divisions.

It is the fear of a shrunken city. Immediately after the storm, many residents, often black, worried that low-lying, flood-ravaged neighborhoods would be left unbuilt and turned into wetlands by urban planners. Though that possibility has diminished, one fear won't dissipate - that those same areas may wither and die as a result of restrictive zoning changes or a waning commitment to rebuilding in certain parts of town.

It's the issue that tugs at New Orleans resident R.C. Brock, 68, more than the threat of another flood, even with the start of the hurricane season today. Brock is building a replacement home on a Lower Ninth Ward block where water once covered the rooftops.

"We ask the question all the time: 'What are y'all doing for us in this neck of the woods?' " said Brock, whose new four-bedroom cottage is being erected in a battered landscape of empty lots and flooded-out houses. "We can't get streetlights down here. We got holes in the street."

The sentiment can be felt in neighborhoods across the city that have yet to see the return of schools, parks, and other government services. And while it is not solely felt by black people, the issue has taken on a palpable racial dimension.

Since Katrina, white residents have gained more political power in New Orleans, helping elect the first white-majority City Council since 1985. Historically, many of the city's white elite have lived in high-ground neighborhoods that were not badly flooded. A recent poll indicated that a majority of white voters do not support rebuilding some vulnerable areas.

The result, among many blacks, has been a "justifiable paranoia" that parts of the city will be left to languish, said Mtumishi St. Julien, director of the Finance Authority of New Orleans and a resident of the battered New Orleans East area.

That paranoia is based, he said, "upon a historical legacy of privilege, which seems to be heavily based on race."

The fear has also complicated the fate of the city's proposed master plan, the much-anticipated document that will guide the city's poststorm redevelopment for the next two decades. In November, a citywide vote was required to give the plan the force of law.

The measure passed, but narrowly, after black voters rallied in opposition. They argued that a draft of the plan had not been written yet - and feared that it might be used to sneak in back-door limits on development that could slowly and subtly kill off struggling black neighborhoods.

"There are issues in terms of whether the shrinking city will take place by a declared policy or an informal policy of neglect," said Ron Nabonne, a local attorney and political consultant who helped lead opposition. "I have family who own homes in these low-lying areas. It's a very emotional issue."

A draft of the master plan was released in March; it promised to address "the needs and aspirations of every resident in every corner of New Orleans."

Some black leaders, however, are supporting state legislation, approved by a Senate committee Thursday, that would allow residents to vote again on whether a final draft should be implemented.

The Senate bill was introduced by Senator Ed Murray, a Democrat and black legislator who has announced his intention to run for mayor in 2010. He said the government never offered an equitable buyout program that would allow residents to move out of vulnerable neighborhoods, in many cases leaving them no choice but to move back.

"People were encouraged to come back, and people have done that," he said. "You can't now say that we're not going to have city services in those areas."

Maggie Merrill, policy director for Mayor C. Ray Nagin, said the city has been committed to an equitable recovery plan. The problem, she said, is that the damage to infrastructure was the most serious in the most severely flooded areas and has, therefore, taken longer to fix.

In the early stages of recovery, the idea of shrinking the city's footprint was most prominently espoused by the nonprofit Urban Land Institute, which was hired to advise the citizen-led Bring New Orleans Back Commission appointed by Nagin. The proposal sparked passionate outcries from displaced residents and their allies.

Dismantling neighborhoods, they argued, was a violation of human rights, perhaps an attempt at ethnic cleansing. A former City Council president said the concept was tantamount to "not honoring the dead."

Under this blistering pressure, Nagin and the city government allowed Katrina's exiles to return and more or less rebuild wherever they wished. Since then, New Orleans has grown to an estimated 336,000 residents - about three-quarters of the prestorm count.

Badly damaged areas like New Orleans East and the Lower Ninth Ward have only been partially repopulated.

Since 2000, the percentage of whites in the city has increased about 4 percent, to 30.7 percent. The percentage of blacks has fallen from 66.7 percent to 60.7 percent, according to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

The shrunken footprint concept has been largely abandoned by the city's political class: No member of the City Council, black or white, publicly supports it.

But a poll by Tulane University and the nonprofit Democracy Corps indicates that the issue is far from settled among everyday New Orleanians. Some 64 percent of white respondents agreed that "some areas of New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina should not be rebuilt as residential areas again."

Of blacks polled, 74 percent disagreed with the statement. ■