

Rebuilding the city on a human scale

NEAL MORRIS

Point of View

There is a simple tool to decrease the number of blighted buildings in New Orleans, and it doesn't involve convincing Washington or Baton Rouge to give us any more money. It also aligns the interests of workforce housing advocates, neighborhood stakeholders and preservationists.

It is nothing more than a tweak to a program that is already in place. And the agency that administers the program wants our input.

Each year the Louisiana Housing Finance Agency publishes a document called the Qualified Allocation Plan, or QAP, that outlines priorities for workforce housing. What type of housing do we want to build? What will it look like? Where will it be located?

The Draft QAP for 2010 was published in mid-July, and if adopted, will spur the creation of workforce housing in New Orleans that will look amazingly similar to most of what has been built since Katrina: large mega-plexes.

But Orleans Parish has about 79 percent of its pre Katrina population and the stock of blighted housing — staggering even before Katrina — is now hovering at nearly 66,000 vacant units.

It is wrong-headed to fund and build mega-plexes when thousands of empty singles, doubles and vacant lots sit nearby. New and renovated singles and doubles will help our neighborhoods in a way that a big-box complex never can.

A small change to the guidelines in the QAP could spur the renovation and creation of new singles and doubles over the creation of large mega-plexes.



DAVID GRUNFELD/ THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Many New Orleans neighborhoods have empty homes that could be refurbished.

Some of the guidelines in the QAP are complicated, but most are surprisingly simple. For example, to encourage energy efficient housing the QAP awards points for green construction. Developers who commit to building green get more points and as a result more energy-efficient housing is built.

The housing that is built is a direct reflection of how many points are awarded for that type of construction in the QAP.

We developers build these large complexes because that is where we achieve economies of scale. It is harder and more expensive to renovate existing homes and build new singles and doubles than it is to build an equal number of units in a large complex.

But we also want our share of the limited supply of credits. If enough points are awarded for building in a particular way, then we will follow the points.

Many experts think that if 80 percent of the homes within a neighborhood are occupied, then the neighborhood will "tip" toward full occupancy.

With so many of our neighborhoods delicately balanced at a point where they could either tip toward being full of residents or decline to jack-o'-lantern status, doesn't it make sense to spend our dollars in a way that removes vacant and blighted units and creates new and renovated singles and doubles?

Right now the QAP awards only four points to developers who build scattered, single-family and two-family homes. It ought to give at least 10. Only then will developers opt to build the scattered singles and doubles that will do the most to eliminate blight within our neighborhoods.

Of course it costs more to do a sensitive rehabilitation of an existing double than it does to build unit.

145 in Building II of the Mega-plex Glen Apartments. In the draft QAP the maximum a developer can spend to produce a single-family home is \$22,000 less than he or she can spend to build a cookie cutter unit within a new, elevated mega-plex.

This makes no sense. Scattered site costs more to build, not less, and therefore the maximum allowable development cost for scattered site should at least equal, if not exceed, what a developer can spend on a raised, big-box complex.

In the first years after Katrina it made sense to build the most economically efficient housing as quickly as we could. We wanted as many of our citizens back as quickly as possible and with each day that passed the probability that a displaced New Orleanian would return home decreased.

Now, the pace of New Orleanians returning home has slowed to a trickle. We need to change our priority from "the most housing the quickest" to "what will do the most to bring back our neighborhoods." The housing finance agency has already had one public hearing to ask how people think the draft QAP should be changed, but the board has not yet voted on a final version.

The Landrieu administration is serious about blight elimination in New Orleans. This is a no-brainer. The mayor should work his extensive network and lobby the LHFA board and staff to amend the draft QAP so that we get more singles and doubles in our neighborhoods, not mega-plexes.

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