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## Clamoring to Come Home to New Orleans Projects

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)

NEW ORLEANS, June 5 — Hundreds of displaced residents of public housing have for several days been returning here for the first time since Hurricane Katrina.

They are armed with little more than cleaning supplies and frustration, in an effort to force the city to reopen their storm-damaged apartments.

The city, saying the projects are not ready, has refused.

Outside the largest complex, the St. Bernard Housing Development in the Seventh Ward, tenant groups have organized evacuees into a tent city called Survivors Village. At the C. J. Peete Development in Central City, older residents, mostly women, broke into their old apartments and carted away plastic bags of refuse and ruined furniture.

At the Florida housing complex in the Ninth Ward, residents slipped through fences topped with razor wire to reach their old units. They piled up heaps of debris that lined Bartholomew Street in the shadow of Interstate 10.

In bone-baking heat under a cloudless sky, evacuees traveling from Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Houston and elsewhere fumed at the city and federal housing officials who have opened fewer than 1,000 of more than 8,000 public housing units in a city suffering from a housing crisis and a shortage of workers.

The residents promised on Sunday to gut and rebuild their own units, and they said they planned to be back permanently — with or without the city's permission — as soon as their work was done.

"They're not giving us any help, and we're tired of waiting," a resident, Nickole Banks, said of the Housing Authority. "People want to come home."

Damage to the projects ranged from very little to severe. The Housing Authority says that as many as 90 percent of the apartments are unsafe and uninhabitable and that time-consuming environmental evaluations remain unfinished. To the residents, these are excuses. They fear that city officials are really trying to redevelop the projects to bring in other residents with more money.

That is a move that some city and federal officials say would be desirable. Private developers have openly discussed the possibility of rebuilding some projects to house a much wider range of tenants.

Because private homeowners are being encouraged to return to the same areas, the public housing question has become part of a larger debate about the future of the city's poor population. Does New Orleans intend to make itself a home for them again?

After the storm, many of the most important institutions and services for the poor broke down and were never repaired. Charity Hospital, a historic institution for the poor, remains closed.

The public defender system has been unable to provide lawyers to poor defendants, and public transportation is essentially broke and is providing far fewer rides.

"They're trying to steal New Orleans from us," Phyllis Jenkins, who has been living in Fort Worth, said Sunday outside what used to be her home in the sprawling St. Bernard development. "Well, I will not be displaced anymore. I'll take my home any way they give it to me. It's been 10 months. They've got to know we're serious. We're going to stand here until they let us in our homes."

Local officials have been clear that they do not want to return to the way things were before the storm, when 10 traditional public housing developments concentrated low-income residents in some of the worst conditions in the city, leading to intense crime and drug use.

"We don't need to recreate pockets of poverty," the president of the City Council, Oliver M. Thomas Jr., said. "They don't work. We want more mixed-income, working communities. I think that's really the only way."

Some officials have made remarkably unveiled comments suggesting that the storm did the city a favor in terms sweeping away the poor.

Representative Richard H. Baker, a Republican from Baton Rouge, said just after the hurricane: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it. But God did."

A spokesman for the Housing Authority, Adonis Exposé, said the authority was encouraging private and public partnerships to redevelop the projects, a move that began in limited form before the hurricane.

"We find it has worked out, and we're looking into doing it at a lot of other sites," Mr. Exposé said.

Before the storm, 2,000 public housing units had been demolished to make way for newer, better complexes. That stoked fears among residents of public housing that they were being scattered to nowhere in particular.

That turned out to be the case in the redevelopment of the St. Thomas Project, the largest and most controversial

to date. It is now a mixed-income development called River Garden, with a small fraction of the original public housing tenants.

Residents who have been protesting fear more of the same could be in store for them. Some of the poor and their advocates see the lack of action as a delay tactic to diminish the chances that many would return.

The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which took control of the bankrupt local housing authority years ago, says it is continuing to assess the storm damage to the buildings.

"I wish I could say everything's great, come on home," an assistant secretary, Orlando J. Cabrera, said in an interview. "But it's not great. We've got entire parts of the city that have very few services, that have questionable ability in terms of infrastructure. We have to ask the hard question: 'What would these folks do? Can we put people in there?'"

Mr. Cabrera said considerable federal money was available to allow private builders to redevelop public housing in such situations. The Housing Authority has begun to apply for those funds.

Developers have been seeking permission to rebuild the crown jewel of the projects, the Iberville Housing Development, on a coveted location next to the French Quarter. It is a gem of Depression-era buildings, a sturdy assemblage of small-scale town houses with wrought-iron balconies that overlook courtyards and oak trees. The project, barely damaged by the hurricane, continues to house hundreds of families.

Michael Valentino, the managing partner of a hotel group here, and some tenants have proposed knocking down walls to make the apartments bigger, adding public art and fountains, and bringing in some tenants who would pay market-rate rent.

So far, no deal has been made.

"The magic of Iberville is that the architecture is magnificent; it could be beautiful and vibrant again," Mr. Valentino said about the development, which replaced the Storyville red-light district in an early example of slum clearance. "It's a linchpin piece of the redevelopment of Canal Street and the Quarter."

Mr. Valentino and other developers have the support of some tenants like Kim Paul, president of the residents' council. But they have also drawn the ire of another group, Hands Off Iberville, made up of housing advocates and tenants.

Even though she wants to help remake Iberville into something it never was, Ms. Paul complained about how slowly housing officials were letting residents return to the development, the least damaged in the city. She is in the unusual position of standing up for tenants and developers at the same time.

"I can show you that the apartments don't have mold or mildew," she said Sunday as she joined the other protesters at St. Bernard who were eating jambalaya out of plastic cups. "Before we do anything, we're trying to get all the pre-Katrina residents home."

Passers-by on St. Bernard Avenue, a main thoroughfare, generally supported the peaceful protest outside the fenced-in project. A woman from the Uptown section, Cliffie Pettigrew, stopped her truck and said, "I don't know if you folks are supposed to be here or not, but I want to help because I remember how sad I was when I couldn't get home."

"What ya'll need?" she asked.

"Everything," they answered.

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