

Richard Moe
PRESIDENT

May 28, 2010

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As I retire from the presidency of the National Trust for Historic Preservation after seventeen years, I feel a deep appreciation for the relationship we have worked to develop with the federal government, both as a respected and credible advocate for preservation, and as a valued partner in a variety of public-private initiatives. However, one of my greatest regrets is that we have been unable to persuade your administration to reverse the needlessly damaging decision, rushed through just before your inauguration, to bulldoze 25 square blocks of a New Orleans neighborhood in order to build two new federally funded hospitals—one for the Department of Veterans Affairs, with demolition funding from HUD, and the other, funded largely by FEMA, for Louisiana State University. On the last day of my tenure at the National Trust, I write to implore you once more to investigate and reverse this terribly misguided decision. It's not too late.

Ironically, you are traveling to Louisiana this very day. Of course, you are there to address the tragedy of the BP oil spill and to reassure the people that the federal government will do everything in its power to help them recover from this environmental disaster of unimaginable magnitude. But I urge you also to consider a way in which your leadership could bring immediate hope to the people of New Orleans, by stopping an urban disaster that can still be avoided.

The VA and LSU hospital plans call for the razing of a 67-acre site in Lower Mid-City, including the demolition of more than 250 homes and businesses, 150 of which are historic properties. In this working-class neighborhood, where homes have been handed down within families for generations, many of the homes now slated for destruction had already been rehabilitated after Hurricane Katrina. The needlessness of this vast destruction is exemplified by the LSU plans to include a total of seven square blocks of surface parking lots, which would further separate the new hospitals from the struggling Central Business District. This ocean of surface parking would be large enough that the entire VA hospital could fit within it.

This entire hospital project, developed under the previous administration, at the behest of former Mayor Nagin, is the antithesis of what your administration hopes to accomplish in our nation's cities by bringing together the goals of sustainability, livable communities, neighborhood preservation, affordable housing, urban

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revitalization, and transparency and public involvement in local government decisions. Instead, this project is a classic example of 1960s-style urban renewal.

Your administration has the opportunity to make New Orleans the first demonstration of how the new enlightened policies can revitalize an injured city—instead of serving as the last example of the destructive and ineffective old way.

It is worth remembering that New Orleans was spared from an earlier disastrous project—an elevated six-lane highway along the French Quarter riverfront—by the new administration of President Nixon (who later signed the National Environmental Policy Act into law). More than forty years later, we see clearly what a terrible idea that elevated highway proposal would have been. But just like the currently planned VA and LSU hospitals, the Riverfront Expressway had the strong support of local and state politicians, and the New Orleans business community. Fortunately, Nixon's new Transportation Secretary, John Volpe, listened to the voices of the broader public in New Orleans, and recognized the irreparable harm that would be caused by forever separating the city from its riverfront. On July 1, 1969, Secretary Volpe canceled the federal funding for the project.

In this case, your leadership is needed, not to take the draconian step of pulling federal funding, but instead, to require the location of the hospitals to be shifted in order to avoid neighborhood destruction. For example, an independent poll of New Orleans voters last fall showed that, by a two-to-one margin, the public supports reusing Charity Hospital for the LSU facility. A study by architecture firm RMJM concluded that building a new hospital within the shell of the historic Charity Hospital building would save two years and \$283 million, restoring health care to New Orleans much more quickly and cost-effectively. A coalition of 77 local and national organizations (including the American Planning Association and the Congress for the New Urbanism) formally joined us in calling for an open and transparent planning process to relocate the hospitals.

In short, the proposed destruction of the Lower Mid-City neighborhood is wasteful, unnecessary, and just plain wrong. In a city where so many people lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina, it is unconscionable for the federal government to fund the needless destruction of hundreds more.

I hope you will consider the opportunity for your legacy in Louisiana to include saving the historic Mid-City neighborhood from the bulldozers in New Orleans. Forty years from now, the next generation will certainly look back on these hospital plans with the same bewilderment we now feel in response to that elevated highway: How on earth could anyone have thought that was a good idea? At a time when the people of Louisiana are feeling especially vulnerable and helpless, your leadership in

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saving this neighborhood from federally funded destruction would provide a ray of hope for all.

Of course, the National Trust stands ready to provide further information or to assist in any way we can.

Warmest regards.

Sincerely,



Richard Moe

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cc: Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor and Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Relations and Public Engagement