

The Foundation for Historical Louisiana

December 4, 2008

The Honorable Jim Fannin, Chairman
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Tom McVea, Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

The Honorable Neil Abramson, Bernard LeBas, Rickey Nowlin, Kay Kellogg Katz, Kevin Pearson, Gary Smith, Patrick Williams, Richard Burford, Dorothy Sue Hill, Walker Hines, John Schroder, Scott Simon, Thomas Willmott

I would like to thank you for your graciousness in the aftermath of the Charity Hospital incident on Tuesday, December 2, 2008 when the Foundation for Historical Louisiana and the principal architect from RMJM Hillier, along with a physician, were excluded from attending the inspection of the Charity Hospital building in New Orleans by the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Health and Human Services. We were obviously surprised and disappointed that we were unable to observe or participate in the committee's tour of the building. We have accumulated a great deal of information about the building, its condition and its future viability as a re-built medical center. We thank you for your interest and concern regarding this important issue and we await the opportunity to present the findings of the Charity Hospital Feasibility Study in a public hearing before your committee.

We do wish to state what we observed regarding the events which transpired at Charity Hospital. The Foundation for Historical Louisiana and the architects responsible for the independent study for re-use and adaptation of Charity Hospital were invited by state representatives to explain parts of the study on site. We were stopped at the door by Charles Zewe, spokesperson for LSU, saying "I strongly object to you being here." When asked exactly who was blocking our entry, Mr. Zewe replied "I'm stopping you, on behalf of LSU." He also said the tour was only for representatives, even though we observed other non-representatives had been allowed entry. We observed that Mr. Jim McNamara, who is not a state representative and is an active advocate for building a new LSU hospital, was allowed through the doors after this encounter. When we asked Mr. Zewe about this discrepancy, Mr. Zewe said Mr. McNamara was an invited guest of LSU. It was very clear to us that LSU was acting as the gatekeeper on who would be permitted into the building.

It is our understanding that the issue regarding state funding of LSU's plan to abandon the Charity building as a medical center and build a brand new hospital is very much an open question at this point in time. We are aware of LSU's position that the issue is "closed" and that LSU is planning on proceeding with construction. (In an email dated 12/3/08 to FHL from LSU President Lombardi, Dr. Lombardi stated, "Now that the state has officially selected a site for the new LSU Academic Medical Center, we have moved on to focus on the construction of this hospital." In a letter from Assistant Commissioner Jerry Jones dated November 26, 2008, Mr. Jones said "As you may be aware, a final decision regarding the location of the replacement facilities for the Medical Center of Louisiana at New Orleans has been made."). If these statements are true, why would the committee have gone to Charity Hospital to seek information on December 2?

It is our understanding that, despite these statements, the financial issues underlying this project are still very much unresolved. We are especially concerned that the actual cost of this LSU proposed project greatly exceeds what has been publicly stated (1.2 billion dollars). Further, LSU's refusal to seriously consider the less costly and more expedient alternative of restoring the existing Charity Hospital building has serious consequences both financially and with regard to timely restoration of accessible health care in New Orleans. We look forward to a full and open discussion on this important issue. We are also available to re-visit the Charity Hospital site with the committee should that be helpful in this process.

Of most urgent concern is that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has announced selection of a site co-located to the proposed new LSU hospital site in New Orleans. We believe the selection of this site by VA was heavily influenced by LSU's statement of their intention to build the new LSU hospital. If the VA builds on the site

selected, and the state does not proceed with LSU's new hospital, VA will be left isolated from the Medical District.

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The issue has been quite controversial since the location of these two hospitals will require the demolition of hundreds of historic buildings, including private homes and businesses, covering 71 acres in Lower Mid City. The State has agreed to carry out the expropriations of these homes and businesses on behalf of the City of New Orleans. Based on the representation that the new LSU hospital is a "done deal", demolitions of homes will begin soon on the most dense part of the historic neighborhood. The citizens who are facing the loss of their homes and businesses are the same people who were encouraged to come back and rebuild after Katrina. They struggled to reestablish their communities, only to now face losing their homes again – this time to bulldozers. Many of these tax-paying citizens have stated their intention to leave the state altogether if these expropriations go forward.

If, in fact, the best solution is to restore and re-use Charity Hospital as the site for the LSU hospital, the location of the VA hospital needs to be reconsidered and re-configured. There is urgency to this matter, as the VA has announced their intention to proceed. The VA has assured all parties in the Federal Section 106 historic preservation review process that they are committed to building in New Orleans. There are other alternatives that could be a win-win for all.

The vacant Charity Hospital building presents an opportunity which the State has never had before: the complete transformation of an historically significant icon into a world-class medical facility. The building is currently unoccupied. This is a new, extremely rare opportunity that allows the entire building to be gutted. The one million square foot, structurally sound shell could be fitted out into a modern sustainable medical marvel. Such a restoration would send an important message about the progressive stance of the State of Louisiana in creatively integrating new facilities into the fabric of our historic communities and buildings. We would become a nationally recognized leader and model for other communities. Such an outcome would also allow medical care to be made available more quickly and at significantly less cost than the current LSU plan to build an entirely new facility by destroying an historic neighborhood and abandoning the existing Charity building.

LSU could rehabilitate Charity into a 21st century hospital, the VA could build on the much less densely populated LSU site near Claiborne Avenue, creating a medical corridor that is consistent with proper urban design and has synergy with all of the medical facilities. (See Site Plan B). Downtown New Orleans could be revitalized instead of abandoned, and the residential neighborhood could be saved. We would have the same jobs, the same economic opportunities, the same top medical corridor – sooner, at less cost, and with less destruction.

We are very concerned that the exorbitant cost of building an entirely new hospital will result in a cash drain that will mean less money available to attract and keep top-notch medical professionals and researchers. The savings could go into what truly counts in creating a world-class facility. It could be used to attract the best doctors, the best faculty, innovative research, and cutting edge technology. These elements, along with sound leadership, are critical in a world class facility.

We have approached this question from a perspective of common sense and careful analysis. The findings of our study regarding the feasibility of the re-use and restoration of the Charity building offer a real alternative which we believe will be beneficial to the state, its taxpayers, residents, and medical providers. We are deeply concerned that the proposal now on the table by LSU is the most expensive, most time-consuming and most destructive choice. This decision will likely burden the entire state for generations to come.

The Foundation for Historical Louisiana looks forward to the opportunity to appear before your committee on this subject. The RMJM Hillier study is available, along with a short video explanation, on our website at www.fhl.org.

Please contact me if you have any questions at 225-445-3800. I welcome the chance to meet with you to discuss any aspect of this.

Sincerely,
Sandra L. Stokes
Executive Vice Chair
225-445-3800

cc: Members of the Louisiana Legislature

www.fhl.org