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Richard Moe
PRESIDENT

December 17, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake, M. D.
The Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

Thank you for your letter of December 9. The National Trust for Historic Preservation strongly supports the goal of returning health care to veterans in New Orleans quickly and cost-effectively. In our view, the Mid-City neighborhood site selected by the Department of Veterans Affairs will undermine those goals, and therefore, is not in the best interests of veterans or the community.

Although several alternatives were available, the Department of Veterans Affairs chose the site that is not only the most damaging to the community – destroying 8-10 square blocks of a historic district, including 123 historic buildings, the majority of which are homes – but will also be the most costly and time-consuming site to execute.

The Lindy Boggs site is 30 percent larger, already assembled, contains no homes, and could be acquired immediately from a willing seller. Construction could begin relatively quickly. In contrast, the Mid-City site selected by the VA will require lengthy legal proceedings to forcibly acquire properties and throw hundreds of residents out of their homes.

The touted mitigation of relocating homes and rehabilitating a few key buildings at the Lower Mid-City site is both inadequate and will add to the price tag and the delay.

Your letter cites three positive characteristics of the Mid-City site: central location near Tulane and LSU; “optimal ingress and egress”; and the ability to generate investment in a “Bio-Science District.” However, two of the other alternatives (Lindy Boggs and LSU’s preferred site) also serve these goals, at far less cost in terms of community destruction. In any event, two of these goals may well prove illusory:

First, the “expected” affiliation with LSU’s new facilities may never be fully attained. LSU’s grandiose plans for a \$1.2 billion academic medical facility are dependent on two funding sources:

- (a) State financing, which has not been allocated and must compete with a wide variety of other needs in the context of a massive state budget crisis; and

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(b) FEMA reimbursements for damages to Charity Hospital, hundreds of millions of dollars of which remain in dispute.

The site chosen by VA carries with it the risk of being separated for years from other established medical facilities in the Central Business District as LSU's 34 acres lie cleared and vacant.

Second, while the Lindy Boggs and LSU sites are also consistent with the proposed Bio-Science District, the district as currently espoused by local officials would push bio-sciences facilities farther and farther away from the Central Business District. This would in turn dominate the majority of the Mid-City Historic District, rather than building on the existing clusters of operating facilities (such as Tulane Medical Center), new facilities (such as the Bio-Innovation Center on Canal Street and Cancer Research Center at Tulane and S. Claiborne), and existing buildings (including Charity Hospital).

Finally, the mitigation package you mention is anything but "robust," and is certainly not proportional to the magnitude of the destruction that will be inflicted on the Mid-City neighborhood. The combined VA and LSU medical centers would destroy 165 historic homes and businesses (123 from the VA site and 42 from the LSU site). Yet the estimated mitigation would only produce:

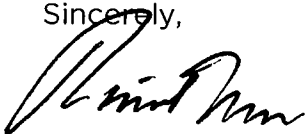
- Relocation of no more than 20 historic properties from the VA footprint, with the owners paying all costs over \$40,000;
- Small grants estimated at \$25,000 for 60 historic homeowners *outside* the medical center footprint to repair and rehabilitate their homes; and
- Minimal salvage.

In addition, it will be virtually impossible to design a major medical facility to be "sensitive to the architectural character of the surrounding neighborhood," - a character that is defined by small shotgun houses.

I appreciate your efforts. I urge again, however, that you reconsider this destructive decision.

Warmest regards.

Sincerely,



Richard Moe

RM:pb