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PRESERVATION®

Richard Moe
PRESIDENT

November 14, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake, M.D.
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

Knowing that you will soon be making your final decision about the location of the new VA Medical Center in New Orleans, I am writing to urge you, on behalf of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, to weigh carefully the various options before you. The "Lindy Boggs" site, one of the two VA alternatives in the City of New Orleans under formal review, is clearly the least harmful historic preservation alternative, by an enormous margin. Choosing the Lindy Boggs site would not only avoid the destruction of a historic neighborhood, but would also enable the VA to return health care to veterans in New Orleans much more quickly and cost-effectively. Even though the Lindy Boggs site would not be immediately adjacent to the proposed new LSU medical center, we believe the proximity of about one mile would be adequate to take advantage of a great deal of synergy between the two facilities and would be consistent with the proximity that VA medical centers have with teaching hospitals in other cities.

By contrast, the selection of the proposed "RPC" site would involve the demolition of at least 123 historic homes, and 8-10 square blocks in the Mid-City Historic District, just for the footprint of the VA project alone. It would be immediately adjacent to the proposed new LSU academic medical center—but at an enormous cost in terms of historic properties and neighborhood destruction. In addition, the pace at which health care for veterans would return to New Orleans would likely be substantially slower if this site were chosen over the Lindy Boggs site.

I am well aware that the City of New Orleans is placing enormous pressure on the VA to locate at the RPC site in the Mid-City neighborhood, even though the RPC site has many disadvantages for the VA. For the sake of the public interest as a whole, I hope you will resist the City's efforts to push the VA to the destructive RPC site, and instead, pursue the "win-win" opportunity presented by the Lindy Boggs site. Clearly, this choice would not only benefit the veterans you serve, but would also signal the VA's respect and support for the New Orleans residents who are working so hard to rebuild their historic communities.

If there is a middle ground to be found in these difficult deliberations, which at least would minimize harm, I believe you may find it if you would consider

combinations of the alternatives that are currently on the table. For example, if the new VA Medical Center were shifted in whole or in part into the proposed LSU site (with LSU reusing Charity Hospital and/or reducing its footprint), the destruction of historic properties could be greatly reduced, because the LSU site is at the edge of the historic district and much of the site is outside the district altogether. This hybrid option could spare a host of other historic buildings at the RPC site, while achieving the goal of adjacency with the proposed LSU and existing Tulane facilities. Earlier plans, you may know, called for VA and LSU to share the site. While this hybrid approach is not the best of the lot from a purely historic preservation standpoint, it would certainly be less harmful to the Mid-City Historic District than the RPC site.

To summarize, these are the implications and the costs of choosing the RPC site:

- VA would need to await the eviction of families and acquisition and demolition of 123 historic homes in the historic Mid-City neighborhood and preparation of the site.
- Consequently, substantially more time would be lost in returning healthcare services to New Orleans area veterans.
- With no immediate assurance of financing for the LSU Academic Medical Center, the new VA Medical Center could find itself isolated at a site next to 15 square blocks of undeveloped land for an unknown length of time.
- Mitigation measures would include the VA contributing \$700,000 to a mitigation fund that would not even begin to approach off-setting the losses and destruction of historic properties in the RPC site.

By contrast, here are the implications and the benefits of choosing the Lindy Boggs site:

- Breaking ground at the Lindy Boggs site would signal to veterans that quality health care in the New Orleans area will no longer be in doubt, and will return as rapidly as possible.
- The Lindy Boggs site would require no demolition of any historic properties.
- Time would be saved in acquiring the property, since the parcels are larger and the sellers are willing.
- The VA would be a welcome presence in the neighborhood, whose leading organization, the Mid-City Neighborhood Association, expressed in its recovery plan the desire that a hospital return to the Lindy Boggs site.

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- Veterans, health care professionals, and established businesses make up the neighborhood.
- Public transit is available and travel time to the LSU and Tulane medical schools and facilities can be counted in minutes.

A third possibility—occupying the LSU-preferred site with or without LSU—would not avoid harm to historic resources, but would certainly minimize it. Environmental and historic preservation reviews now underway have addressed all of these sites, and thus this third option would not require additional reviews.

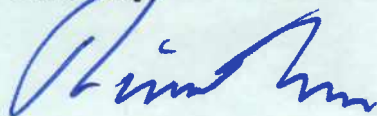
The National Trust for Historic Preservation has been deeply engaged in the post-Katrina recovery efforts in New Orleans for the last three years, working closely with our partner the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans. We established a field office in the city soon after Katrina; we drew nearly a thousand volunteers to assist in the city's recovery; we were key in obtaining fifty million dollars for Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama in federal preservation grants; we have completed 15 demonstration rehabilitation projects with low-income home owners; and we have made the case nationally that New Orleans is an irreplaceable part of our country's heritage and culture, and must be saved with its landmarks and historic neighborhoods restored.

As part of our efforts to assist New Orleans' recovery, you can see that we have become significantly involved in advocating for first-class health care and medical training facilities in the city. I have met personally with Don Orndoff, Director of your Office of Construction & Facilities Management, to express our serious concerns about this project, and I know that Don has met on a regular basis with members of my staff, as the National Trust has been actively involved in the review process under the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

I know that you will consider all of the facts carefully, and I hope that you will agree with us that a move to the Lindy Boggs site in New Orleans would be the ultimate winning strategy all around.

Warmest regards.

Sincerely,



Richard Moe

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cc: Donald H. Orndoff, Director, Office of Construction & Facilities Management, VA