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Brechtel Park group seeks improvements

Hurricane Katrina accelerated decline

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Uptown residents looking for a pleasant outdoor experience need only head over to Audubon Park. Those closer to Mid-City have sprawling City Park to get their nature fix.

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And Algerines? Choices are more limited.

In the past, they have had Brechtel Park, site of countless picnics, birthday parties and Scout meetings in the '70s, '80s and '90s. However, recent years of slow decline accelerated by Hurricane Katrina have left Brechtel a shell of its former self.

The park is open only on weekends, and those willing to overlook the extreme shortage of security, signage and lighting as well as decaying trees due to cat's claw and other vines have sometimes been greeted by gun enthusiasts firing their semi-automatic weapons in the park.

A group of Algerines is working to change all of that and return Brechtel to its former glory. Founded last year, Friends of Brechtel Park is a grassroots organization of business professionals, homeowners, residents and volunteer leaders aiming to revitalize the park.

At Saturday's meeting of FOBP at the Park Timbers Clubhouse, the organization's chairwoman, Aylin Maklansky, reported that after doing some research, she learned that the amount of money budgeted for the park by the city last year was "zero dollars."

This year, that figure has been bumped up to \$10,000, said Maklansky, a lawyer with the firm of Kanner and Whitely, still far below an amount that could make any meaningful changes in the park's condition.

"We were one of the first neighborhoods to come back after the storm," Maklansky said. "Now we're thriving, we provide a great tax base for the city, and I think that we're entitled to our fare

share of reinvestment in our own community.

"In the (Louisiana) Constitution, we are guaranteed the right to a quality environment," added Maklansky, "and that includes recreational activities. We feel like there's a mandate that not just the city but the state needs to address the quality-of-life issues for us."

Fortunately, FOBP has a powerful advocate, namely Councilwoman-at-Large Jackie Brechtel Clarkson, who was on hand Saturday and vowed to help reincarnate the park that was bought by the City of New Orleans in 1971 and named for her father, John Brechtel, the force behind the New Orleans Recreation Department.

"Algiers was a safe haven" after Katrina, Clarkson said. "Had it not been for Algiers, we really couldn't have opened the city. We owe Algiers a lot. I plan to live up to that."

Clarkson said that the main reason Brechtel Park has not received adequate financing is due to more pressing priorities after Hurricane Katrina.

"In the beginning, it was parks versus police stations," Clarkson said, explaining that the rebuilding of critical infrastructure such as police and fire stations as well as coming up with a 100-year flood protection system took immediate precedence.

But with federal money finally starting to flow into the city, as well as improvements in the city's bond rating, Clarkson said that the time to focus on Brechtel Park has arrived.

"We're there," Clarkson said. "The money is coming."

"It's been a long story," she added, "but it's got a good ending."

For more information on Friends of Brechtel Park, visit www.brechtelpark.org or send Maklansky e-mail at amaklansky@brechtelpark.org.