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The Times-Picayune

Brechtel Park's slow recovery blasted

Residents want action at Algiers landmark

Thursday, February 19, 2009

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Contributing writer

The frustration of those attending Wednesday's informational open house at Our Lady of Holy Cross College's Moreau Center concerning the EcoPlan for Algiers' Brechtel Park wasn't with the plan itself. In fact, many at the meeting offered that restoring ecosystems disturbed by Hurricane Katrina at Brechtel Park, the central goal of the plan, is a good idea.

The issue for many of the citizens at the Feb. 11 meeting, held by the West Bank Redevelopment Corp. and Brown + Danos Landdesign Inc., is that they've been to many meetings in the past, even pre-Katrina, in which action to refurbish the park was trumpeted, only to fall by the wayside.

"These are beautiful pictures," said Park Timbers resident Jim Wessel, referring to the charts and renderings used to explain the plan, "but what are you going to do with them? Let's get in the park and fix it already."

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The EcoPlan itself "is wonderful. It needs to be done, it needs to be assessed," said Aylin Maklansky, founder and president of the Friends of Brechtel Park. "But let's start doing something. The city said they were going to fix the shelters by the end of December; didn't happen. Then they said January; didn't happen. There are tables with nails shooting up out of them that are hazards for children.

"Cutting the grass every three weeks isn't going to do it," she added.

Aside from action, Maklansky said that residents are looking for leadership from the city. The EcoPlan, she said, "should also be part of a master plan, and as you heard from the city, there is no master plan, and there's not a plan to have a master plan at the park, and I think that's a serious problem."

Though too slow for many, progress at the park is occurring. Instead of being open just on weekends, Brechtel will now be open two weekdays, and a new security guard is being trained. Which two days of the week, however, hasn't been determined, according to Timothy Lavelle, chief of operations for the city's Department of Parks and Parkways.

"I think what's important to understand is, this is a long-term process, and the EcoPlan is the beginning," said Paul Richard, president of the West Bank Redevelopment Corp.

Some, in fact, were downright giddy about the plan. "We're very excited," said Joelle Finley of the Orleans Audubon Society, "because if they want to do an ecologically sound renovation of the park, with native plants coming in, you're going to have birds dropping out of the sky to go there, so we think it's the right thing to do, and we're actually quite thrilled about it."

For most of the others, however, the thrill will likely come only after action, not another meeting. "Yes, Katrina happened," said Maklansky, "but it's time. People are leaving the city because of quality of life issues like this."