

Redeveloped St. Bernard project tries to surpass community it was modeled after

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As the St. Bernard projects stood vacant, taking in 8 feet of water when federal levees failed during Hurricane Katrina, an Atlanta neighborhood was hailed as the model for replacing what was once one of the most crime-ridden and impoverished areas of New Orleans.

Today, local real estate professionals hope Columbia Parc, a \$440 million mixed-income development on St. Bernard's 52-acre footprint, has a brighter future than the Villages at East Lake, the mixed-income community it was fashioned after.

Built in the 1970s, East Lake Meadows was considered one of the most dangerous public housing projects in the country before developer and former resident Tom Cousins established a foundation to revitalize the neighborhood that had been built on the former Atlanta Athletic Club site.

Its demolition and subsequent redevelopment in the late 1990s has been praised as a successful way to holistically revitalize a community. In addition to mixed-income housing, the Villages at East Lake includes a new YMCA and a charter school that provides student-athletes with access to the revamped Atlanta Athletic Club golf course.

Columbia Parc plans initially called for integrating a nearby City Park golf course into the community footprint, and Bayou District Foundation public affairs director J.T. Hannan said negotiations with City Park continue, without elaborating further. Bayou District Foundation is the nonprofit organization overseeing the Columbia Parc project.

"We're getting there," Hannan said of the talks.

Plans for an early childhood center, which Hannan said would receive revenue from the golf course, are included in the Bayou District Foundation's vision for Columbia Parc, and McDonough 35 High School will be moved from Treme to a new building next to the development.

But new schools and recreational amenities may not necessarily guarantee the future of Columbia Parc.

East Lake's charter school hasn't panned out as the attraction it was billed to become. The problem, said Atlanta Realtor Lisa Marie Smith, who lists homes in the area, is that the school gives preference to residents who were there before the neighborhood's overhaul. That forced many families who moved to send their children to schools outside the neighborhood.

"So what happened was a lot of people moved to East Lake thinking



J.T. Hannan, vice president of government affairs for the Bayou District Foundation, explains the layout of housing units at Columbia Parc, built on the site of the former St. Bernard Housing Community. (photo by Frank Aymami)

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their kids were going to get into that charter school, and it bumped up (property) values around it.”

Those artificially inflated housing prices have since plummeted, Smith said, noting that homes surrounding East Lake that initially sold for near \$200,000 are now priced as low as \$50,000. Higher-priced executive homes closer to the golf course in the \$400,000 range “are just not moving,” she said.

“The thing about that whole East Lake area is two streets behind that golf course is a nasty street that you wouldn’t want to live on,” Smith said, saying there are abandoned homes or others that are over-occupied.

“It didn’t gentrify as rapidly as it needed to,” she said. “And now with the downturn in the market, for \$400,000 you can go a lot of other places.”

At Columbia Parc, it seems no expense is being spared to make sure the complex bears little resemblance to its predecessor. There’s a movie theater, a swimming pool and a grand piano in the community room.

But Realtors who list homes in the area say more needs to be done in the surrounding neighborhood.

“You still have a lot of houses that are gutted in the area, right across the street from (new) bigger houses,” said Selena Carey with Latter and Blum, adding that the empty properties have dragged down values of homes in the St. Bernard neighborhood.

Also lacking in the area is basic retail, such as grocery and drug stores, said Mark Rodi of ReMax Louisiana.

Still, agents concur that what’s happening in St. Bernard now is still far better than conditions before Katrina.

“It’s a much safer neighborhood,” said Rodi, a 36-year veteran of local real estate and past president of the New Orleans Metropolitan Association of Realtors. “There are more positive vibes coming out of that development than we had pre-Katrina.”

Hannan said his agency is working with the nonprofit St. Bernard Project to acquire and rehabilitate properties surrounding the complex and with Stirling Properties to find a commercial development partner for a local grocery store.

Those potential projects would put Columbia Parc far ahead of East Lake, said Smith, the Atlanta Realtor.

“There’s no retail,” she said. “Nothing.”

There are now more than 500 families living in the Columbia Parc complex, representing about 1,100 people, according to the Bayou District Foundation. Only 90 families remain from the original St. Bernard Housing Project and the rest of the residents in the 900-unit complex at the time of the storm are scattered throughout the country.

According to the Housing Authority of New Orleans, at least half have no intention of returning. If they did come back, they would have first dibs on apartments, Hanna said.

About two-thirds of the residents at Columbia Parc qualify for low-income rental rates. A soon-to-begin second phase will add 120 senior housing units and is expected to be complete in the fourth quarter of 2012.

Columbia Parc timeline

Up to \$440 million could be spent on Columbia Parc, a mixed-income housing development that has replaced the St. Bernard Housing projects. Here's a breakdown of the project's timeline so far.

August 2005	Flooded levees allow 8 feet of water to flood the St. Bernard Housing Community.
November 2005	East Lake Foundation of Atlanta invites local business and civic leaders to tour its development.
January 2006	Bayou District Foundation is formed, with a goal of implementing the East Lake model at the St. Bernard site.
July 2008	All of the St. Bernard Housing project buildings are demolished except for three.
November 2010	Phase 1 of Columbia Parc is complete, with 466 mixed-income housing units, at a cost of \$123.3 million.
March 2011	Phase 1 is fully occupied at all income levels.
September 2011	The first part of the \$24.5 million Phase 2 is complete, with 49 additional units. Construction begins on another 49 units.

Source: Bayou District Foundation

There is a waiting list for units at all income levels.

"The market response has been exceptional," Hannan said.
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