

# Florida Avenue bridge to boost home values

By Richard Slawsky

Staff Writer

ST. BERNARD officials hope construction of the long-delayed Florida Avenue bridge and roadway will kickstart parish property values, which have long lagged behind other areas around New Orleans.

State Department of Transportation and Development officials unveiled plans for the \$180 million project Feb. 17. Work is set to begin in spring 2006 and could be finished in 2009.

"It seems like I was a kid when this thing started," said St. Bernard Parish President Henry "Junior" Rodriguez. "I'm elated that we are finally going to see something happening."

Officials have long blamed traffic congestion and evacuation problems for lowering property values in the parish.

Between 1999 and 2004, the average selling price of a home in St. Bernard increased 25.9 percent from \$95,574 to \$120,344. The population remained fairly level during that period at about 67,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"Property values have always been



The \$180 million Florida Avenue bridge, which would link St. Bernard and Orleans parishes, is expected to boost property values in the area.

RENDERING COURTESY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION AND DEVELOPMENT

\$203,642, even though population fell to 469,032 at the beginning of 2004 from about 484,674 in 1999.

For the greater New Orleans area, which includes Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa and Washington parishes, the average home sale price rose 30.4 percent from \$139,460 in 1999 to \$181,870 in 2004.

Once the bridge project is complete, O'Brien says parish property values will jump. "Because it will alleviate the traffic, it will encourage more people to come here," he said. "It will also encourage people to go deeper into the parish as well."

St. Bernard Parish has three main routes: St. Claude Avenue, North Claiborne Avenue and Paris Road. St. Claude Avenue and North Claiborne Avenue require draw-bridge spans.

"Definitely, this will alleviate some of our problems with regard to traffic congestion," Rodriguez said.

The project involves a fixed-span bridge next to the drawbridge at Florida Avenue.

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returne num from office.

U.S. State department officials dismissed the assassination charges as absurd.

"These accusations are false and ridiculous," said Richard Boucher, spokesman for the U.S. State Department. "The idea that we want to get rid of the Venezuelan president is simply wrong."

Chavez announced last month his country wants to sell Ciego. Chavez also hinted he would seek to divert oil shipments to China.

However, Venezuelan officials immediately began backtracking on the idea Venezuela would stop selling oil to the United States.

"Venezuela has been, is and always will be a reliable supplier to the United States," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez.

Venezuela has the largest proven oil and gas reserves of any country in the Western Hemisphere at close to 75 billion barrels.

Combined with reserves of extra-heavy crude oil from the country's Orinoco Belt oil fields, total Venezuelan reserves exceed 300 billion barrels, more than Saudi Arabia's proven reserves of around 260 billion barrels of oil.

In December, Venezuela supplied 1.6 million barrels per day to the United States — more than any other country, including

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