

Plans for Florida Ave. bridge move forward

By Richard Slawsky
Contributing Writer

State Department of Transportation and Development officials unveiled the proposed design for a high-level, fixed-span bridge at a St. Bernard forum last week, and despite initial concerns from upper and lower Ninth Ward residents about the project, community leaders seem to be pleased with the outcome.

While many lower Ninth Ward residents were hoping that the project would fuel growth in an area that has been economically stagnant for decades, some in the upper Ninth Ward had drawn comparisons between the proposed expressway and the construction of the I-10 over Claiborne Avenue during the 1960s. Residents on both sides of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal were worried that the project would displace homeowners and that construction would damage homes and businesses.

"I certainly have kept up with the issue," said Vincent Nzinga. "We are very interested in making sure that this community is protected."

The plan unveiled by the DOTD, which is estimated to cost \$180 million, entails building a fixed-span bridge next to the present drawbridge at Florida Avenue. The road will end at off-ramps and on-ramps at Alvar and Poland avenues in the lower Ninth Ward.

said. "We need to be able to come to some sort of agreeable compromise."

Plans for a fixed-span bridge at Florida Avenue have been in the works for at least 20 years, according to people familiar with the project. The project will be funded through the Louisiana Transportation Infrastructure Model for Economic Development program, which gets money from the state's 4 cents per gallon fuel tax.

"It seems like I was 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."

Contracts for the bridge span and support pylons should be awarded by the beginning of next year,

according to TIMED officials. Contracts for the other phases of the project — the section between Tupelo Street and Paris Road and between Alvar Street and Tupelo — will be awarded in early 2007. Work on those two sections will proceed simultaneously.

The project will also include a turning lane on Alvar Street to Old Gentry Road to provide easier access to Interstate 10 or Interstate 610 from Louisa Street.

Although nearly everyone agrees that diverting traffic that normally would use Claiborne Avenue, some people expressed concern about adding traffic to Poland Avenue. Any increase in traffic flow needs to be accompanied by an increase in police patrols, they said.

"I always have to wonder about

increasing anything that is going to negatively impact a neighborhood when there is no real plan to patrol the streets," said Beth Butler, head of the Louisiana Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. "You already have traffic flying on Poland, and I'm always concerned about how things are going to end up at the end of the day if streets are torn up from more traffic." ◊

On the east side of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, the road will drop to ground level near Caffin Avenue with traffic signals at Caffin and Tupelo avenues. The road will rise once it enters St. Bernard, ending at Paris Road.

Residents of the lower Ninth Ward had insisted on the traffic signals in hopes that increased traffic would spur economic development in the area. Little exists in the area now, they said, and an elevated roadway to St. Bernard would not have any benefit to the lower Ninth Ward.

Under one of the plans initially proposed by the DOTD, the roadway would have extended to Franklin Avenue. That plan would have run adjacent to a park maintained by the church and taken parking areas.

"We were concerned about it, and the Department of Transportation and Development addressed that issue for us," Nzinga said. "The church and the area here aren't being considered and they are moving it into another direction."

The DOTD held a series of meetings in early 2004 to hear input from Orleans and St. Bernard residents about proposed routes for the project. Initially, 16 different plans were under consideration. That number was eventually whittled to four, but it the two sides had trouble reaching an agreement on a final design.

"I went to one of the meetings in St. Bernard, and what I found is that people are not understanding what each other wants," Nzinga