

# Sustain the 9!:

## Greening of the Holy Cross/Lower 9th Community

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### Introduction

THE LOWER 9TH WARD, JUST AS MUCH OF NEW ORLEANS BEFORE HURRICANE KATRINA, has been a community with poor energy efficiency and limited investment in environmental sustainable architecture and infrastructure. Residents of the Holy Cross/Lower 9th ward pay high utility bills for homes that are not properly weatherized or insulated. Residential construction investments during the post-Katrina recovery period have brought about an unprecedented opportunity to increase the awareness of area residents as to what it means to be energy efficient and sustainable. City-mandated, neighborhood-level strategic planning in the Holy Cross/Lower 9th community has increased residents' desires to understand more about what these concepts mean. And, as we undertake this project, we will explore how other communities have prepared more effectively for future environmental shocks as part of an overall comparative recovery analysis (Campanella et al. 2004).

At the center of this activity has been the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (HCNA) of the Holy Cross neighborhood of the Lower 9th ward. It has been joined by its principal academic partner, the Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research (CBR).

HCNA is your all-American neighborhood organization of the Holy Cross neighborhood of New Orleans. Founded in 1981, HCNA's mission is to improve the living conditions and serve the needs of its residents, preserve cultural and architectural heritage, serve as a clearinghouse for information, and actively represent the interests of the neighborhood in dealings with city, state, and federal agencies, private businesses, community organizations, and individuals, for the purpose of improving the community.

CBR is a research and training partnership between Tulane and Xavier universities. Its mission is to conduct and coordinate interdisciplinary research and learning to enhance global understanding of environmental issues, provide solutions through innovative applications and communication, and inform policy and practice.

Another premier partner in the Holy Cross/Lower 9th post-Katrina recovery has been the World Monuments Fund (WMF). WMF's support has come in the form of actual financial contributions and volunteer effort, as well as recently listing the Holy Cross Historic District, along with all of New Orleans' historic neighborhoods, on WMF's 2008 *Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites*. Through this list, WMF calls attention to and helps attract addition-

al support for this local community as it further works to recover itself in a green sustainable manner.

### **Sustainable planning**

From February to June 2006, with the help of CBR staff and supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Energy via the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, the Holy Cross/Lower 9th community undertook a strategic planning process that focused on energy-efficient, sustainable recovery post-Katrina. A result of this planning process, a recovery plan was developed, known as *Sustainable Restoration: Holy Cross Historic District & Lower 9th Ward*. Contained in this plan are recommendations from residents of the Lower 9th, including Holy Cross, on the reconstruction, repair and restoration of their neighborhood. The report is divided into four main sections. The first, “Urban Design and the Built Environment,” is followed by recommendations in three categories traditionally associated with sustainable development: “Economy,” “Environment,” and “Quality of Life.”

### **Sustainable practices**

Building on the ideas envisioned by the community in the Holy Cross/Lower 9th sustainable restoration plan, HCNA, with funding from Mercy Corps and the Blue Moon Fund, has established a project called the Lower 9th Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development (CSED). CSED’s mission is to increase the awareness and understanding of Lower 9th ward residents regarding energy efficiency and environmental sustainability during the post-Katrina disaster recovery and investment period. CSED also works to assist

returning Lower 9th residents with resources and training on rebuilding their homes energy efficiently through community bulk purchasing, enabling acquisition of low- or no-cost rebuilding materials for residents.

An ultimate intent of this project is to instill in residents an interest in knowing whether a product or substance that they will be using in their personal rebuilding is harmful or not to their own health and that of the environment (McDonough and Braungart 2002).

Numerous groups and individuals have approached the Lower 9th community recently to assist residents in the monumental strategic planning that they have been required to go through to prove community viability. These same groups and individuals will be the principal ones bringing information on green sustainable development and energy efficiency. The Office of the Federal Environmental Executive defines “green building” (an important component of sustainable development) as the practice of (1) increasing the efficiency with which buildings and their sites use energy, water, and materials, and (2) reducing building impacts on human health and the environment, through better location, design, construction, operation, maintenance, and removal—the complete building life cycle (Cassidy et al. 2003).

### **Potential implications for policy**

To ensure that the relevance of this sustainable recovery work extends beyond the Lower 9th neighborhood and New Orleans, qualitative and quantitative research tools are being utilized to monitor and evaluate the Lower 9th community’s recovery. Through questionnaires, the CSED and

CBR are routinely assessing residents' knowledge relative to sustainable recovery, and trying to determine the uptake of sustainable practices and identify any limits to implementation of such practices. This survey tool will be developed with input from state agencies, local and national non-profit organizations, and community leaders. Once completed, the results will be compiled in a report for submission to the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute and shared with local residents and stakeholders. The sustainable development and green building sector has rarely focused on the working class and minority communities in the United States. Lessons learned from this community-driven recovery effort will highlight current strengths and weaknesses of policy incentives and inform non-profit organizations beginning to work with these communities. More importantly, the information gathered from residents and

stakeholders will help further influence the course of action, shaping energy and environmental policy in the region.

### **Conclusion**

With the enormous degree of devastation that occurred as a result of Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans area and the Lower 9th ward in particular have the great opportunity to rebuild and re-develop its community with an emphasis on sustainability and energy efficiency. It is anticipated that this community-driven recovery, developed and implemented in the Lower 9th Ward, will be replicable in neighborhoods throughout New Orleans, and across the U.S., with the potential to yield a more energy-efficient, environmentally attentive, and sustainable community for all coastal communities and regions as a whole. And, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, led by the Holy Cross/Lower 9th, could become that city and

region that *care did not forget*.

### **References**

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