

New Orleans looks to river for salvation
By CAIN BURDEAU, Associated Press Writer
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NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Longtime port developer Joseph Cocchiara Jr. stands between railroad tracks and old warehouses. He could walk 100 feet and fall into the murky Mississippi River, yet he's on some of the most coveted property in the city.

The lure: the riverfront is some of the highest ground in flood-prone New Orleans, though development has been limited in recent decades because shipping was more lucrative than housing, shopping or tourism.

"In the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, a lot of this stuff was very, very active for cargo," Cocchiara, a senior manager at the Port of New Orleans, said as he peered into the gloom of the closed Celeste Street Wharf.

Now, a couple of factors make the land ripe for development: Shipping business has been dropping at the port for years and developers want to concentrate new buildings on high-and-dry land after Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 percent of New Orleans.

"We need to build on the high ground, and the riverfront is high ground," said Pres Kabacoff, a major New Orleans developer.

After years in the making, a plan to transform the riverfront now looks like a vital nugget in the city's rebuilding. Planners want to tear down warehouses and wharfs and build riverside promenades, condominiums, a cruise ship terminal, a river research center and museum, hotels and an amphitheater on the big crescent bend in the river - hence, the Crescent City - to give audiences sweeping views of the New Orleans skyline. Plans call for public and private funds for the projects, which could cost well over \$300 million to complete.

"The river and riverfront were the key to the founding of this city, and similarly I think it's the key to the future," said Douglas Meffert, a Tulane University river studies professor involved in the riverside research center. "I think we need to think of the river as our front yard again."

In this pancake-flat delta, the land next to rivers is high because it grew with each mud- and silt-filled spring flood of centuries past. American Indians used these natural ridges as trade routes between villages. The French platted the town square of Nouvelle Orleans on the east bank of the Mississippi. And plantations and early roads hewed to them.

The riverfront was a public space before the port boomed in the 1800s and warehouses, known as "sheds," went up in the early 1900s, said John Magill, curator of the Historic New Orleans Collection.

To get to this glossier future, New Orleans will need to tear down this past.

Much of the riverfront is lined with timber and metal wharfs named after New Orleans' streets: Piety, Mandeville, Congress, Desire, Louisa. The wharfs and warehouses invoke a long-gone era of stevedores, dockside brokers and smoke-spewing cargo ships.

Katrina made the case for tearing down the wharfs even stronger. One stretch went up in flames when a nearby propane tank storage facility exploded; storm gusts tore up others.

New Orleans' businesses and population could become more concentrated on the river. Ideally, planners say, a light railway system and ferry and water taxi services would be added to make life on the riverfront more fluid.

In February, the Dock Board, the agency that governs the port, approved turning four miles of maritime riverfront into new development. The City Council is expected to take up the issue in the coming weeks.

John Koerner, who runs a private investment company in New Orleans, said lenders would be attracted to riverfront projects and high-rise condominiums as long as the market appears viable.

But the difficulties of riverfront development are in plain view: A panorama of vacant buildings - a power plant, factories, warehouses - overrun with weeds and pigeons.

There have been successes - at least before Katrina struck. The Rouse Co., the national developer, counted the Riverwalk Marketplace mall as one of its more profitable properties; cruise ship and steamboat companies plied the river; and a sprawling riverfront convention center buzzed with activity. Most of that development was sparked by a World's Fair in 1984 centered on the Mississippi.

But not everyone is buying into this future-by-the-river scenario. Neighborhood groups worry the city's soul would be marred if glitzy condos for out-of-town snowbirds and malls replace the old riverfront.

"New Orleans was founded as a port city in the French Quarter, and to see maritime activity going on there to this day is very exciting," said Nathan Chapman, president of Vieux Carre Property Owners, Residents and Associates Inc., a group that looks after the wishes of French Quarter residents and businesses.

Attempts already have been made to raise the height limit of buildings from 50 feet to 75 feet to accommodate the planned development, said Chris Costello, president of the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association.

"To go up an extra 25 feet makes it very egregious in our neighborhood," Costello said. The Faubourg Marigny is made up of winding streets and Creole and shotgun cottages with lush backyards immediately down river from the French Quarter.

Instead of fixating on new development, the city should focus on repairing blighted property and turn that into the living space that is so urgently needed, Costello said.

There's another question: How wise is it to build large public places on a river where huge oceangoing vessels travel?

Such concerns go back to 1996, when a freight liner crashed into the Riverwalk mall and hotel complex. No one was killed or seriously injured, but property damage was estimated at \$17 million.

Similarly, a restaurant once located across the French Quarter on one of the most perilous bends on the Mississippi was repeatedly struck by barges.

"The way we look at it, if it's not that close and sticks out and obstructs traffic, it's not too bad," said Larry Gwin, a tugboat captain. But, he added, "even if we say something, they don't listen."

But Cocchiara, the 60-year-old port official who's spent much of his adult life advancing plans for riverfront development, says it appears the time has come for major change on the river. The city and its leaders, he said, "realize something's at stake and they can do something about it."

Standing on the Mississippi's crescent bend beside the burnt, matchstick-like, pilings of the wharf that went up in flames during Katrina, Cocchiara gazes at the high-rise skyline of the business district and talks about the future of New Orleans.

Future residents of New Orleans, he hopes, might be more like him: People who love the river for "the feel of it, the smell of it, the taste of it."