



Everything New Orleans

## Mid-City VA hospital street closures approved

By Bill Barrow, The Times-Picayune

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Michael DeMocker/The Times-Picayune

The New Orleans City Planning Commission's 5-1 vote was the first formal action by any municipal body on either the federal hospital or the adjacent 424-bed teaching hospital the state proposes.

Amid cries from residents accusing the New Orleans City Planning Commission of being a rubber stamp, commissioners voted 5-1 Tuesday to approve the eventual closure of **Mid-City** streets within the footprint of a planned federal hospital for veterans.

The vote, which sends the matter to the **City Council**, typically would be an arcane procedural step in such a large undertaking as a 200-bed hospital for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. But the proceedings carried significance as the first public hearing and formal action by any municipal body on either the federal hospital or the adjacent 424-bed **teaching hospital** the state proposes.

Calling for the final vote, Commissioner Joe Williams acknowledged the body's previous lack of input -- at least publicly -- in planning that started months after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. He said, however, that it wasn't enough to risk delay.

"I for one can say I'm not happy about involving the Planning Commission so late in the process," he said. "But we sit here almost five years after the storm. ... At some point, we have to sit here and say it's time to move on."

Deputy City Attorney Brenda Breaux described the vote as necessary to help restore health care services to veterans in the region.

Commissioner George Amedee unsuccessfully called for delaying action, then cast the lone vote against the plan. Amedee cited arguments that the vote was premature, given questions about traffic and drainage studies, the city's master plan and complaints about the timing of the written comments phase before Tuesday's hearing.

The affected streets are those inside a perimeter of South Rocheblave Street, Canal Street, South Galvez Street and Tulane Avenue. Street closures on the state footprint -- across Galvez to South Claiborne -- are expected to be on a future agenda.

The hearing comes as an Orleans Parish court considers a lawsuit asserting that Mayor **Ray Nagin** exceeded his authority when he signed a November 2007 deal with the VA promising to give the federal government the land in "construction ready" condition.

Part of the city's defense in that suit is that Nagin always planned to hold public hearings and votes required by the City Charter, though they now must take place as state contractors continue buying and expropriating the land.

Planning Commission Executive Director Yolanda Rodriguez, some City Council members and other officials had said previously that state and federal authority absolved those entities from having to pass through the normal municipal planning hoops.

Opponents of the hospital plans highlighted the turnabout and urged commissioners to use the vote to force reconsideration of the project, from site selection to design.

"Fairness has not been part of this process," said Mary Howell, a lawyer whose office is a block outside the VA footprint. "Somehow, y'all got left out, You have been a bystander to this, and that's something that has harmed us from the beginning. You have an important role to play. Please don't abdicate it."

Nagin, she said, "obligated land the city didn't even own."

Attorney Bill Borah said Louisiana State University, which will run the new state hospital, has effectively dictated the site of the medical complex to the city. He noted that the hospital planning was excluded from **master plan** residential meetings around the city, an "outrageous decision" he said "calls into question the integrity and the value" of the document. Borah urged commissioners to punt the question until the City Council has an opportunity to reconsider the master plan.

Malcolm Erhardt, who owns the public relations firm that bears his name, gave a forceful endorsement of the street closure, saying that many of the opponents have been involved in at least 16 hearings that federal and state planners hosted to satisfy historic preservation and environmental laws. "This is an issue, despite what you hear, that has been studied at length," he said. "Some could argue that it's been overstudied."

After the meeting, Erhardt, whose firm represents LSU, engaged in a heated discussion with a woman who attended the hearing. Erhardt established that he has attended more public hearings on the subject than she. The woman retorted, "That process didn't start until after Nagin" signed a deal with VA.

A testier exchange played out earlier, when opponent Brad Ott noted that the street closure proposal was made public on the Friday before Mardi Gras, with comments due the following Wednesday. City Hall was closed on the business days in between. Ott asked Chairman Lester Johnson why the commission's staff report was not available publicly until Tuesday morning.

"We're not taking questions," Johnson answered.

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