



Forum on Court Consolidation & Relocation

Held in New Orleans, the City that Care Rebuilt
October 3, 2007

Opening Remarks of Judge Carl J. Barbier

President, New Orleans Bar Association

This Forum is the result of the NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION and its members recently learning that there was a plan being discussed that would result in the relocation of all of the Orleans Parish Civil Courts from their present downtown location to the area of Tulane and Broad near the present Criminal Courts. In fact, we were told that the City was about to formally announce the plan any day, and that was the impetus for the letter that I wrote to Mayor Nagin and Dr. Blakely, expressing our concerns and asking that no final decision be made until lawyers had an opportunity to comment.

We should begin any dialogue by agreeing that we are all working for the best interests of New Orleans. Different ideas should be understood and discussed. These decisions need to be made without getting into personalities, or mired in indecision, which unfortunately has seemed to impede the recovery of New Orleans and the community we all love. Certainly the judicial system, including the orderly resolution of civil disputes, domestic problems and the safety of the public through efficient, competent and coordinated criminal justice efforts, is a priority and the backbone of a functioning community. If we all truly care, the city will be rebuilt and compromises reached.

This forum is about the city and not who said what, who came up with what idea or who deserves credit. The NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION board intends to designate a liaison to the City and the Courts, to represent and voice the interests and concerns of our members, and to keep them informed. The NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION offers itself as a valuable legal resource for the City and Dr. Blakely in helping to implement the master plan.

First, what this forum is NOT about. It is not about opposing a new courthouse for our Civil Courts. The NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION strongly supports the need for a new courthouse facility for the Orleans Parish Civil Courts and Judges. For many years, the NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION has been on record in support of various proposals to

build a new courthouse, first at the former location of the La. Supreme Court, and more recently, as part of the Hyatt Jazz Park plan, which we understand would include a new City Hall. These or any other suitable downtown location would be strongly supported by the NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION and the thousands of lawyers and law firms presently located in the downtown and CBD areas.

Second, this forum is NOT about opposition to the plan for a new "Criminal Justice Complex" at Tulane and Broad for the Criminal Courts and associated agencies, such as the District Attorney, the Orleans Public Defender, New Orleans Police Department and the Sheriff. Each of those agencies is in dire need of new or renovated facilities.

What we propose to discuss here today is whether the Orleans Parish Civil Courts should or must be relocated to Tulane and Broad, as part of the "Master Plan" prepared by FEMA and the City. Mayor Nagin's recovery czar, Dr. Blakely, has graciously accepted our invitation to come here this afternoon to present the proposed relocation plans in greater detail, and to answer any questions you may have or respond to any concerns that may be raised.

Before we have Dr. Blakely's presentation, however, I would like to spend a few minutes briefly talking about how and why we have arrived at this point. Of course, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have dramatically changed the landscape of New Orleans and the legal landscape as well. Both the criminal district court complex and the civil district courthouse sustained damage, with the criminal courts and parish prison complex obviously sustaining much more substantial damage from flooding in the area of Tulane and Broad. As a consequence, the New Orleans Bar reached out and opened its doors to some of the civil court judges, while our local federal courthouse was used by the criminal court judges for a number of months until their own courthouse was once again habitable.

In reading over the Master Plan, it seems that the original concept was to build or rebuild a Criminal Justice Complex in the Tulane and Broad corridor. At some point, the planners decided to expand the proposed complex to include the Civil Courts, including Civil District Court, City Courts, and Juvenile Court. From what I have read, it appears that the primary justification for this was Act 621 of the 2006 Regular Legislative Session, which mandates that the criminal and civil courts, along with the clerks, sheriffs, and other affiliated offices, be consolidated beginning in January, 2009, with full consolidation occurring in January, 2015 when the Juvenile Court will be abolished and merged into the district court.

So, I begin this discussion by looking at Act 621, to see what it says about how and when this consolidation would occur.