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St. Bernard site holds potential for holistic redevelopment, visitors say

By [Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune](#)

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Ted Jackson/The Times-Picayune Developers estimate Columbia Parc at the Bayou District will cost \$430 million, \$300 million of it devoted to housing.

A millionaire and two billionaires toured the brand-new townhouses that have replaced about 10 blocks of the St. Bernard public housing development on Tuesday, with hopes that their ideas will break the cycle of poverty in that part of New Orleans and further the success of their new national community-building organization.

As a cold wind blew hard across the Gentilly site, the developers of the site, called Columbia Parc at the Bayou District, gave a tour to legendary investor Warren Buffett. Last year, Buffett co-founded an organization called [Purpose Built Communities](#) with Atlanta commercial real estate mogul Tom Cousins and wildly successful hedge-fund manager Julian Robertson, who was represented Tuesday by his son Alex Robertson.



Michael DeMocker/The Times-Picayune Xavier University President Norman Francis talks with political consultant Mary Matalin, left, Tuesday during the inaugural network member meeting luncheon for Purpose Built Communities at the Pavilion of the Two Sisters in City Park.

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As they walked through a three-bedroom, handicapped-accessible apartment, Buffett leaned over to Bayou District Foundation Chairman Gerald Barousse Jr. and asked, "How far is the nearest grocery?"

"About three miles," Barousse said.

Buffett grimaced. "You'll have to give them free rent for six months or something," he said with a laugh.

While the visitors emphasized that Columbia Parc and its larger Bayou District community are still a long way from being a fully functioning "holistic" community, they praised the plans to date and said that the construction seemed both solid and artful.

"They're just improving on [what we did at East Lake](#)," said Cousins, who a decade ago focused his [East Lake Foundation](#) on the "holistic redevelopment" of East Lake Meadows, a crime-ridden, high-poverty public housing project, "reputed to be the worst we had in Atlanta," he said. Instead of merely building better housing, he and his foundation built a more resource-rich, mixed-income community from the ground up, complete with retail, recreational facilities, better access to jobs and "cradle-to-college" education.

[An adjacent golf course turned out to be integral to those efforts](#), since the foundation uses it to provide jobs, "teach character" to children through the game of golf and create a revenue stream for the community's programs. "I wish I could say that all of this was pre-planned and brilliantly thought out," said Cousins. But the reality is that he bought the defunct golf course to protect his East Lake community investment, because the land was about to be auctioned off and would have become a junkyard, he said.

In the end, Cousins was much more satisfied by the wholesale community change he saw at East Lake than with the piecemeal accomplishments he'd seen in previous decades, as his foundation had invested in scattered anti-drug programs, schools or youth organizations.



"It's the whole," Cousins said, noting that, in a community where it was once common for children to read far below grade level, children were now earning college scholarships and were much more likely to break harmful cycles of poverty. "Now the children grow up to be taxpayers, not tax-users," he said.

But Cousins wanted to take it further. Or, as the new organization's promotional video says, "Tom Cousins had always viewed East Lake as a research and development project." The long-range plan, it notes, has always been to create similar communities on a national scale.

The Gentilly mixed-income site will be a proving ground for those efforts, Buffett said. "New Orleans is the key," he said, noting that East Lake's success came after Cousins "poured heart and soul into it for many years," making some doubt that the model can work as well elsewhere.

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"New Orleans is going to prove it can be replicated," Buffett said.

New Orleans developers also hope that the community can closely follow the East Lake model, although [an arrangement with City Park and its golf courses is not yet complete](#), according to developers. The developers noted they had responded last month to a solicitation from the park, and they hope the golf course will provide an economic engine for their Bayou District efforts. They estimate the development will cost \$430 million, \$300 million of it devoted to housing.

Developers have also partnered with academic institutions to provide education for residents from birth to high school graduation. Children can start as infants at the \$10 million Educare Early Learning Center, which is slated to teach nearly 200 children up until age 5 with the help of Kingsley House and the national Educare Centers network. Older children would matriculate to the \$20 million K-8 charter school, for which the developers have partnered with Akili Academy, a New Schools for New Orleans charter. Older children can attend the \$49 million flagship McDonogh 35 High School, which will be built within the next few years across St. Bernard Avenue from the newly opened townhomes, on the large site once home to Edward Henry Phillips Junior High and Vorce Jackson Waters Elementary.

Although the Bayou District community's larger plans lacked financial details, they call for a new YMCA near the elementary school, along with other necessities, all within walking distance: a supermarket, bank branch, dry cleaner and health clinic.

Last month, a turnaround team sent in by the U.S. Department of Housing and Development wrote a scathing assessment of the Housing Authority of New Orleans, the public-sector partner in Columbia Parc. In the assessment, the team noted that HANO had overspent and could finance only half of the apartments it had planned in 2008, the year it demolished the St. Bernard, B.W. Cooper, C.J. Peete and Lafitte complexes.

But Columbia Parc's developers are confident they can move forward with all five phases of their housing plan, for an eventual 1,325 apartments and homes, said Jim Grauley, chief operating officer of Columbia Residential, which is developing the housing portion of the Bayou District plan. "HANO has stood by us and is committed to funding all phases," Grauley said.

Cousins said that "in the beginning, the most difficult part of the process" was dealing with residents. He recalled East Lake's biggest opponent, tenant representative Eva Davis, who fought the redevelopment in every way possible. "She was insistent that half the units should be public housing," said Cousins, who had envisioned that public-housing-level rents would be charged at only 20 percent of the units, with the remaining 80 percent at market rate.

In the end, his opponent got her wish. "I think that's one of the best things that happened to us," Cousins said. "And I give her credit."

It's hard to tell how the Bayou District developers will view their critics in hindsight. But former St. Bernard residents have routinely complained at HANO board meetings and elsewhere that they feel elbowed out of the decision-making process.

It's not too late to change that, said former Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin, who before she became mayor helped to organize East Lake residents and help the foundation earn their trust.

"It needs to happen at some point," she said. "But some people start with grass-roots organizing. Some start with a grand vision. It happens in different ways."

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