

HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan cuts ribbon at St. Bernard redevelopment, tours 'Big Four'

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

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"It is a beautiful day, and I mean that in all senses of the word," Shaun Donovan, head of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, said Monday as he prepared to cut a shiny red ribbon to open 101 apartments at the former St. Bernard housing development, now called [Columbia Parc at the Bayou District](#).

Groundbreakings and ribbon-cuttings often dominate when Donovan comes to town. But during this visit under sunny skies, he also met with the mayoral transition team, toured other Big Four complexes and announced a new social-services initiative for the thousands of families who receive housing assistance through the Housing Authority of New Orleans.



HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan and Judith Watson

Through a significant new partnership, five local nonprofit groups -- the United Way, Literacy Alliance of New Orleans, Goodwill Industries, Volunteers of America and Via Link -- will now provide services to the thousands of families who either live in [HANO](#) apartments or receive rental assistance through the agency's housing-voucher program.

When compared with other cities and housing authorities, Donovan said later, the need for such services in New Orleans is greater, but HANO had less capacity to provide them. Donovan said improved social services has been a theme of his nationwide, noting that while HUD's previous administration focused primarily on physical and property development, he is expanding the agency's focus to include "human development, which is equally important," he said.

At the Columbia Parc event, Cantrese Wilson, president of what residents called the "new side" of the two-part St. Bernard complex, recalled how she heard about HUD's proposed demolition of her lifelong home. It was not long after [Hurricane Katrina](#), while she was living as an evacuee in Houston, she said, noting that she was "heartbroken" and wasn't sure when her neighborhood would be rebuilt, if ever. She and other residents already saw HANO demolish complexes and then forget developments like the nearby Imperial Drive, which was razed more than 10 years ago and was replaced by nothing but tall weeds.

But in February, the first residents moved into Columbia Parc's mixed-income community, which rents to households from three different income levels: tenants who walk off the street and rent at the highest, market-level rents; very low-income families who receive the lowest "public-housing-level" rents, which are coupled with monthly federal subsidies to the developer; and moderate-income people who receive midrange rents as part of a federal housing tax-credit program.

And so now, Wilson's cell phone rings often as her former neighbors ask about the new public-housing

apartments, which are offered to elderly and disabled St. Bernard-complex residents first; those with more years of tenancy also receive higher rankings. Wilson moved back to the city a few years ago and immediately returned to her church in the area, St. Bernard Baptist Mission, but she has postponed her family's complete return in hopes of being able to purchase one of the new "homeownership" houses that Columbia Parc will sell to qualified former residents.

After the ribbon-cutting at Columbia Parc, a small HUD entourage toured the sites of the other Big Four developments: B.W. Cooper, Harmony Oaks (formerly C.J. Peete) and Lafitte. At each site, Donovan spoke with resident leaders about what was happening -- or not happening.

In 2008, HUD demolished most of the 3,000 Big Four apartments that were occupied when Katrina hit. The agency planned to replace 1,904 by the end of this year, by using Gulf Opportunity Zone tax credits as equity. But it now looks as though HUD will complete only 60 percent of its plans, thanks to a bottomed-out financial market that left developers with financial gaps, few investors and a tough-to-meet Dec. 31 tax-credit deadline.

At the Lafitte complex in the 6th Ward, not far from the French Quarter, Donovan climbed to a second-floor balcony in one of the complex's salvaged buildings with resident-council president Emelda Paul. There, he scrutinized developers' plans to construct 1,500 homes on the long narrow 6th Ward site and its surrounding neighborhood, where construction crews are scurrying to finish a mere 181 houses and apartments on three large blocks by the year's end.

Donovan said he's hopeful that within the next few weeks, [legislation extending the GO-Zone tax-credit deadline](#) will move through a congressional conference committee and to the desk of the president. Once that happens, said Jim Kelly, head of Lafitte co-developer Providence Community Housing, he can close deals with interested investors and "we can move down the block."

Until then, infrastructure work continues at B.W. Cooper, but its larger rebuilding plans are stalled. "I do get impatient," said Judith Watson, president of the resident-management group at the complex on Earhart Boulevard, which has been the slowest of the Big Four to build on its flattened site.

But during the past year, Watson and other resident leaders have seen lots of Donovan, whose visit this week was his fifth to New Orleans as HUD secretary. "I'll be back," he promised a teary Watson, as she told him how some of her displaced residents living in apartments with Section 8 vouchers had trouble keeping up with steep utility bills.

"I want you to come back," Watson said. "Thank you."

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