

End the High-Rise Wars and Save Leake Avenue

**Create “The Levee Park”
And
“The River Road Design Vista”**

**In the Historic Carrollton/Riverbend
Neighborhood of Uptown New Orleans**

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The levee . . . was once a pleasant promenade, where the citizen enjoyed his delightful morning and evening walk

-- Benjamin Moore Norman, *Norman's New Orleans and Environs*, 1845

The New Orleanian likes his river. . . . He likes to walk upon the docks to look at the Mississippi. . . . It is an old custom, this going down to the levee. For the river is fascinating almost always.

-- Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 1928

According to the New Orleans City Planning Commission (CPC), the Carrollton/Riverbend neighborhood is the only neighborhood in all of New Orleans with residential homes that abut directly onto the levee and the riverfront. All other city districts have industrial areas, warehouses, or wharves buffering them from the riverfront. This is what makes the Carrollton/Riverbend area so attractive to developers who want to build high-rise buildings along Leake Avenue so that people can look over the levee and see the Mississippi River.

The first threat to Leake Avenue — high-rise development

There are two conflicting visions for Leake Avenue and our levee. One vision being championed as “economic development” is for a string of high-rise buildings all along Leake Avenue from Audubon Park to the Jefferson Parish line. This elitist vision would enable “empty-nesters” and other wealthy people to live in expensive high-rise condos in order to enjoy a view of the river. This vision would allow enormous Miami Beach-style high-rise buildings to tower over their one- and two-story neighbors in historic Uptown New Orleans. Developers who favor this vision would ring the Riverbend/Carrollton area with large, anonymous gated communities, effectively walling off Leake Avenue and the levee.

The second vision is a more neighborhood-friendly vision, which preserves the “urban village” ambience of the Riverbend/Carrollton area. This second vision retains the historic low-rise structures currently lining Leake Avenue, prevents overdevelopment, and provides improved access to our levee’s green space. It encourages families and children of all ages and income levels to frolic and enjoy access to our unique heritage — our historic levee and its public green space.

The second threat to Leake Avenue — a four-lane truck path

Rumors abound that Leake Avenue is to become a four-lane truck roadway, part of a larger truck path to ring the city. This Leake Avenue truck path would connect the Tchoupitoulas Truck Corridor with the Earhart Expressway and allow more efficient truck transportation around our city. Although the Transportation Element of the New Orleans Master Plan does not call for a truck path, uneasiness about this possibility persists at the neighborhood level.

Tulane University’s recent proposal to redevelop Uptown Square includes a high-rise garage serving 1,000 cars, which will enter and exit onto Leake Avenue. Leake Avenue is only 21 feet wide and has no shoulders or turning lanes. In order to minimize delays entering or leaving the garage during peak traffic hours, the staff of the City Planning Commission, in their preliminary report prepared for the January 27, 2004 CPC meeting, in proviso 3.b., page 29, recommended that “The developer shall provide manual traffic control [i.e. a policeman] at the Garage entrance intersection at Leake Avenue during peak entrance and exit periods.”

But the City Planning Commission’s updated staff report for Tulane’s proposal, dated March 4, 2004 has a new proviso 3.c., page 49, which states

“If required by the Department of Public Works . . . the Developer shall construct . . . a *left turn lane* for eastbound vehicles *on Leake Avenue* turning into the Parking Garage entrance, *upon land provided by the City at no cost to the Developer.*” (Emphasis added.)

In this new situation the city, through the CPC, is freely offering to expand Leake Avenue from two lanes to three lanes, in order to build a turning lane for the developer to provide access to this high-rise development. Once Leake Avenue has three lanes — even if only for a short distance — it will be easier to justify expanding it further into four lanes. And once there are four lanes, it will be easier for trucks to use it. Once trucks are steadily running along this expanded section of Leake Avenue, why not rebuild it as a formal four-lane truck pathway, just like the Tchoupitoulas Truck Path, and connect it to the Earhart Expressway near the Jefferson Parish line?

As the potential new Leake Avenue Truck Path, with its noise, pollution, vibrations, and pedestrian unfriendliness decreases the quality of life for people living near Leake Avenue, long-term residents will lose interest in protecting Leake Avenue from further overdevelopment. This reduced neighborhood commitment will allow more high-rise developments, which will lead to walling off Leake Avenue and the levee.

The City should not give away public land to a developer for free.

If a developer needs a new turning lane for cars to enter its multi-acre development site, the developer should use its own land to build the extra lane. The City of New Orleans should not freely offer to give away any amount of land on the levee side of Leake Avenue to anyone other than the citizens of New Orleans. If this gift of public land is valued at zero in this transaction, does this mean that the City of New Orleans believes that the land along the levee is actually valueless?

Who gets to decide if Leake Avenue stays two lanes or is expanded to three lanes? Shouldn’t it be the people who are now living in closest proximity to Leake Avenue and stand to be the most deeply affected by changes to this street? According to the new CPC proviso, one day years from now when Tulane’s Uptown Square nears completion, an unnamed official in the Department of Public Works, using unspecified criteria, can tell the developer to carve up the public land near the levee without benefit of a public hearing or neighborhood notification.

This updated staff report was released on March 4, 2004, only days before the final CPC meeting on March 9, 2004 when the decision for Tulane’s plan was voted upon. This short timing left no framework for public input or debate.

A new vision for the levee – “The Levee Park”

Several years ago the city in partnership with its citizens created a Master Plan for the future development of New Orleans. On page 12 of the City Planning Commission staff report for the Short Street high-rise condominium building, Zoning Docket 8/04, the staff discusses the future of our Uptown New Orleans’ riverfront and levee, as described by this visionary Master Plan.

The New Century New Orleans Master Plan: Parks, Recreation and Open Space Element: Planning District 3 Uptown/Carrollton: Section C.2., states that the riverfront between Jefferson Parish and Audubon Park . . . is a significant open space and recreational asset. It is to be preserved as green space with areas for biking, jogging, dog walking, horseback riding and related outdoor activities. This element mentions rezoning the levee from LI – Light Industrial to P – Park. (pg. 95)

Leake Avenue and the levee green space are unique. Starting at the end of Magazine Street, Leake Avenue parallels the levee and continues north for approximately two miles until it enters Jefferson Parish and becomes River Road. Four neighborhood associations share responsibility for Leake Avenue and the levee complex. These are the Uptown Triangle Neighborhood Association, Upper Audubon Association, Maple Area Residents, Inc., and Carrollton/Riverbend Residents Association.

Over the past year there has been mounting pressure for overdevelopment along Leake Avenue, including proposals for high-rise buildings at Dublin Street, Short Street, and Uptown Square. As documented on our web site, www.zoningfordollarsiswrong.org, property values in the areas of Council District A that do not have high-rise condominium buildings have risen faster than property values in the areas that *do* have high-rise buildings. Residents along Leake Avenue are rightly concerned that bringing high-rise development into their neighborhood will decrease the value of their properties and diminish their quality of life.

In order to prevent the city from giving away our levee land to developers to carve up for free, we must immediately claim this land as a public park and insist that the city uphold its Master Plan. The levee must remain a public green space reserved forever for the enjoyment of the citizens of New Orleans. Whether or not the Master Plan has been formally adopted as law is moot. What matters most is that this Master Plan correctly expresses the collective will of the citizens of New Orleans and the four united neighborhood associations and stakeholders along Leake Avenue. We must publicly declare that this unique public green space is inviolate and that it must be preserved intact forever.*

* Part of this material appeared in “A Proposal to Save Leake Avenue,” located at www.zoningfordollarsiswrong.org.

Zoning and land use issues

The levee complex is currently zoned “LI” for Light Industrial north of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers facility, and “HI” for Heavy Industrial south of the Corps of Engineers. The levee complex should be immediately rezoned “P” for Park and its name should be changed to “The Levee Park.” Similarly, the blocks of houses running alongside Leake Avenue north of Maple Street should be rezoned Residential, instead of the current Light Industrial zigzag line, which extends north to the Jefferson Parish line.

This Levee Park would have a significant impact on all four surrounding neighborhoods, as well as all of Uptown New Orleans. Property values are usually higher close to a park because nearby residents are able to enjoy the park’s amenities and may thereby enjoy a higher quality of life for themselves and their families. What better way to increase property values for the four neighborhoods surrounding the levee and Leake Avenue than to turn this two-mile green space into an official park?

The length of our new Levee Park is approximately two miles or 10,560 feet. The width of this Levee Park, as measured from “the toe” or base of the levee beyond the railroad tracks to “the crown” or top of the levee is approximately 130 feet. Multiplying this 10,560-foot linear green space by its 130-foot width equals 1,372,800 square feet of new Levee Park space. Dividing this number by 43,560 square feet per acre equals approximately 32 acres of new official park space for Uptown New Orleans. This is approximately 10% of the size of the 340-acre Audubon Park. It is 40% as large as the 81-acre Audubon golf course, 55% as large as the 58-acre Audubon Zoo, and more than six times larger than the five-acre Woldenberg Park. Adding 32 acres of park space alongside two miles of Leake Avenue would benefit all adjacent neighborhoods. This would be infinitely better than decreasing our property values with high-rise condo buildings and a four-lane truck path running along Leake Avenue.

According to *The Times-Picayune* on January 8, 2004, Pres Kabacoff, the developer of the St. Thomas site, said he “is seeking \$50 million in federal assistance for a riverfront park similar to Woldenberg Park that would extend to Jackson Avenue.” The four neighborhoods ringing Leake Avenue already have such a riverfront park. It will be called The Levee Park, and it is already beautiful. We do not need \$50 million to build a new park. All we ask is that no one takes it away from us by walling off Leake Avenue with high-rise buildings next to a four-lane truck path.

The Levee Park will be a unique recreational area, unusual for its naturally occurring linear design. As such, this linear park offers an exciting opportunity for our city to innovate a new type of urban living, embraced by this beautiful, green stretch of land that we can now protect and cultivate as a delightful place for people to walk their dogs or ride their horses with free enjoyment.

Instead of Leake Avenue being only “a place to drive through,” we can make it “a destination to come to.” We can beautify a small strip of land on the railroad side of Leake Avenue. We would only need a few feet. We don’t need a new walking path

because such a walking path already exists on the crown of the levee. With the addition of a few simple plantings on the railroad side of Leake Avenue we can mark this area as something special. Perhaps some local Louisiana plants and an occasional small tree would help. Perhaps a couple of mile markers proudly giving distances in large letters and an occasional old-style lamppost might add more interest. Instead of high-rises let us have trees, and instead of iron bars surrounding gated communities let us have bushes and shrubs.

The Levee Park’s role in neighborhood dynamics

The path at the top of The Levee Park offers a unique view of our historic Carrollton/Riverbend area. Placing a few benches along the top of the levee path would invite visitors to linger in our Levee Park. Perhaps putting one bench facing into town and another bench facing the river would be appropriate, depending upon the view and the area. We would need more railroad crossings, similar to the Moon Walk in the French Quarter, to encourage people to climb the levee and enjoy its unique view and green space.

The Levee Park is already being used as a recreational park by the nearby Lusher School athletic department, musical bands, tourists, neighbors and their dogs. It is currently used for walking, jogging, biking, picnicking, horseback riding, and sunbathing.

The intersection of St. Charles Avenue and Carrollton Avenue is at the middle of our two-mile Levee Park. At this important intersection there should be a large marker, proudly dedicated to the four neighborhood associations who had the foresight and determination to preserve this unique resource for generations to come.

The riverboat *John James Audubon* currently leaves downtown near Canal Street and docks at Riverview Drive in Audubon Park behind the Zoo. We can encourage the use of our new Levee Park by having this riverboat continue one extra mile and make a second stop at the Riverbend. Tourists could then disembark and explore our local shops and restaurants, giving a boost to our local economy.

The ship could then continue one more mile and stop at the far end of The Levee Park at Oak Street. There tourists could climb down the levee and explore the north end of Oak Street. From the north end of Oak Street tourists would find a walking tour, which would allow them to walk down historic Oak Street, past new and existing shops and restaurants, until they reach the streetcar line on Carrollton Avenue. From there they could board the streetcar and return to their downtown hotels. This would be an attractive loop, beginning with a river cruise from downtown to Oak Street, continuing with a walking tour down Oak Street, and ending with a streetcar ride back to Canal Street. Tourists could also get off the streetcar at the Riverbend, climb the levee, and walk along the path on the levee crown to reach the Oak Street walking tour.

This plan would help revitalize the north end of Oak Street. Merchants and restaurants would welcome more foot traffic going past their doors on Oak Street on their

way to and from a small cruise ship terminal at the north end of The Levee Park. New lighting and historical markers would make Oak Street a more attractive tourist destination. Perhaps a small teahouse or coffee shop at end of The Levee Park near the Jefferson Parish line could add a quaint destination for the residents and visitors who travel the path at the top of The Levee Park or arrive by boat.

Currently the zoo bus shuttles visitors from the St. Charles Street entrance of Audubon Park to the cruise ship dock at Riverview Drive behind the zoo. It would be easy for this shuttle to make another short stop at the Riverbend cruise terminal, before proceeding onto the Oak Street terminal. This would further encourage visitors, tourists, and neighborhood residents to take advantage of our many shops, restaurants, and vistas. Perhaps a small fountain in an attractive park setting at the Riverbend section of The Levee Park would have a directory of shops and restaurants encouraging people to visit our local merchants before boarding the streetcar to return downtown.

The railroad is a massive, powerful symbol for our neighborhood. Everyone living near Leake Avenue has felt the shaking of their homes as the train rumbled through the area. It’s always fun to point out to visitors that my house has been shaking for over a hundred years and is still doing OK. Who hasn’t heard the train whistle at night and dreamt of the call of far-off places. When my children were small we all enjoyed running outside to wave at this huge brute of a passing train.

Expanding on these assets we already have in place, let’s also create a kiosk or other structure to display the history of our railroad and what it has meant for the development of Carrollton and New Orleans. Perhaps a location in the Riverbend area, near the intersection of Carrollton Avenue and St. Charles Avenue where the bus now stops would be appropriate. Tourists climbing the levee from this area would be able to stop and read about our historic area. Similarly, informational structures discussing the history of our levees, the history of the Corps of Engineers, the history of River Road, the history of Carrollton, the history of Oak Street or Magazine Street might also be encouraged along our new Levee Park. We might even find space in the area for a handicapped-accessible bathroom for our visitors and neighbors.

One of our neighbors suggested, as a way to attract federal funding, we incorporate a memorial to the Buffalo Soldiers who camped near Audubon Park. After the Civil War African-American troops were organized into a unique fighting unit — the US Ninth Cavalry regiment. In 1866, this African-American regiment was organized in New Orleans and later fought in the Indian campaigns in the American west. The Plains Indians nicknamed them Buffalo Soldiers because of their bravery, which reminded them of their sacred buffalo.

A new vision for Leake Avenue – “The River Road Design Vista”

The New Orleans Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance (CZO) is located at web site <http://ordlink.com/codes/neworleans/index.htm>. According to the CZO, Article 2, Section 2.2 Definitions, Item Number 57 defines a Design Vista.

57. Design Vista. A scenic corridor, vista or scene which follows or extends from any publicly traveled pedestrian or vehicular transportation corridor, either publicly or privately owned, where it is possible to view certain elements or scenes such as buildings, trees, bodies of water and bridges, or groupings thereof that are easily recognizable and generally known as scenic locations within the City of New Orleans, and have been so designated and adopted by the City Council of New Orleans and maintained on the official maps of the City by the City Planning Commission.

Although many people consider the levee complex to be only the large green area on the far side of the railroad tracks, our Leake Avenue-levee complex is actually composed of *four* distinct features. First, the most prominent part of our levee complex consists of the large green space with the walking path on its top, or crown. Second, there is the open area with the railroad tracks. Third, there is the Leake Avenue roadbed itself. And fourth, there is the first row of houses built right next to Leake Avenue, on the town side of Leake Avenue.

I have often driven down Leake Avenue from the Jefferson Parish–Oak Street entrance and been amazed to see Lambeth House and the large condo buildings at the south end of Leake Avenue near Magazine Street look like they were leaning over onto the levee. I have also marveled at how the back of my own property, which abuts onto Leake Avenue, appears to slope downward towards the Short Street side of my property. The reason for this optical illusion of the buildings and house sloping is that the first row of houses is actually built on the levee. The levee doesn’t simply end abruptly at the railroad tracks. Rather, it continues to slope downward into town.

These four items – the levee, the railroad tracks, the Leake Avenue roadway, and the first street row of houses – form a single, unified, harmonious, historic complex. It is this extraordinary streetscape complex that forms a *Design Vista*, which must be preserved *as a whole*. Any changes allowed to any one of these four historic items will inevitably affect the entire levee complex.

According to the Sanborn-Perris “Insurance Maps of New Orleans, Volume Four, 1896,” at the turn of the century the Uptown area near the levee was significantly larger and extended much closer to the levee. This 1896 map shows that part of the Riverbend area at the end of St. Charles Avenue and Carrollton Avenue was occupied by the Fisher Lumber Company and the Picayune Saw Mill. Running alongside the base of the levee was the now defunct Levee Street.

The New Orleans Public Belt Railroad, which runs alongside the levee, began service in 1908. Sometime between 1896 and 1908 several blocks of Uptown New Orleans, which were near the old levee, were expropriated. The houses were demolished and the railroad tracks were laid down in their place. Levee Street, which used to run alongside the base of the levee, was covered by the railroad tracks and Leake Avenue was

constructed on the other side of the railroad tracks 100 feet away from the base of the levee. The map of Uptown New Orleans was thus permanently changed.

Comparing the 1896 Sanborn maps to the 2000 “Official Zoning District Maps, City of New Orleans,” it is obvious that several city squares seen on the 1896 map were either completely removed or radically truncated by the construction of the railroad tracks and Leake Avenue at the turn of the century. This has resulted in many of the odd-shaped small blocks, which now line Leake Avenue, as well as many of the acute angle turns required to enter or exit Leake Avenue. Perhaps in a spirit of compromise Leake Avenue was built without any shoulders or sidewalks in order to demolish as few houses as possible. Although some of these odd-shaped parcels are no longer recognizable as formal city blocks, according to the 2000 zoning maps they still carry their original square numbers.

For example, Square 68 was a large triangular city square, which existed on the levee side of the intersection of St. Charles Avenue and South Carrollton Avenue. In 1896 this square was home to the Carrollton Garden, a dance hall, bar, and shooting gallery. As a result of the railroad construction this square was severely truncated and is now represented by a miniscule island of land upon which only the Daiquiri Shop sits.

This present levee-complex, which consists of the levee, the railroad tracks, Leake Avenue, and the first row of houses, has been working well for one hundred years. The only modifications have been the changing models of the cars running up and down Leake Avenue and a few houses, which have been built or torn down. This is a living, working neighborhood next to the Mississippi River. Each piece has its own job to perform, and each piece does its job well. The river and its terminals work, the levee works, the railroad works, the Leake Avenue roadway works, and the houses are lived in by local residents. This complex works so well that few of us ever consider how special and unique this area really is.

Few cities in the United States can boast they have a working riverfront neighborhood with these four items, which have been continuously and harmoniously working in its same form for one hundred years. Few American cities have two miles of such a broad levee green space serving as a vital link in its city’s safety net.

This unique, century-old, four-part levee complex is a perfect Design Vista, as defined in our Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance. No other area in town has these four elements so seamlessly melded together to form, in the words of the CZO, such a striking “scenic corridor, vista or scene which follows or extends from any publicly traveled pedestrian or vehicular transportation corridor.” Changing any part of this special Design Vista may destroy our precious heritage. Building high-rise structures along Leake Avenue or a four-lane truck path cannot be allowed in our Levee Park or in our unique Design Vista.

Walking along the top of The Levee Park allows us to enjoy our Design Vista. In order to protect the Levee Park and Design Vista we need a new historical overlay to

protect the uniqueness of our area. I propose a new zoning overlay for our new Levee Park and Design Vista which will preserve the peaceful, small town feel of our area. Allowing high-rise condominiums or other such suburban structures must not be allowed under our new historic Park and Design Vista zoning.

As part of our new protective historical overly we should change the name of Leake Avenue to something with more pizzazz and historical meaning. I propose renaming Leake Avenue to “River Road,” or “Old River Road,” or “Historical River Road,” and naming our Design Vista the “River Road Design Vista.” Preserving our new “River Road Design Vista” is much more appealing than just saving Leake Avenue. Few houses have a Leake Avenue address, so changing Leake Avenue to River Road will not be disruptive to many residents. This new, beautified River Road would extend from the end of Magazine Street as it passes through Audubon Park and continue alongside the levee and railroad tracks until it hooked up with the north end of Oak Street. This area has just seen the arrival of Graffiti Graphics and would benefit from a connection to the Old River Road, as well as from its connection to The Levee Park.

Strolling along the path at the top of the levee is pleasant. Tourists and neighbors alike will enjoy looking down into the Historic City of Carrollton and the small-scale, one- and two-story buildings. I cannot imagine walking along the top of the levee and looking out into the living rooms of a string of high-rise condominium buildings along a four-lane truck path on Leake Avenue. The Levee Park and the River Road Design Vista will complement and protect each other from overdevelopment so that our children may enjoy these wonderful neighborhood assets well into the future.

But for much of the 20th century, the river was hidden from view . . . and the old custom of relaxing on the levee and watching all the different kinds of vessels pass by, of necessity, died out. In the last 25 years or so, however, the riverfront has begun to open up again in spots . . . and the New Orleanian has once again been introduced to the river and the sight of ships of all sizes moving in and out of port. . . .

This shift in port activity has opened up the riverfront for more people oriented-activities, from excursion boat . . . to shopping malls and open green spaces. In some ways the river at New Orleans has come full circle – back to the “pleasant promenade” described by Benjamin Norman in 1845.

-- Wayne Everard and Irene Wainwright, *The River Runs Through It: New Orleans and the Mississippi*, New Orleans Main Library, 1998