

# **Speech Presented Before the New Orleans City Planning Commission Opposing the Short Street Condo Project**

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January 27, 2004

Thank you Chairman Truehill and members of the Commission.

My name is Dr. Sheldon Hersh and I have lived on Short Street for 24 years. My home is only 36 feet away from this project. I am a physician specializing in geriatric medicine, which is treatment of the elderly. I am President and National Coordinator of NACDEP, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving medical care for elderly and disabled poor people in our community. This is the first time in 27 years of medical practice that I have had to stop fighting for the lives of my 100-year-old patients in order to fight for the life of my 100-year-old neighborhood.

I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Uptown Triangle Neighborhood Association and I am spokesperson for this Short Street project. We are unalterably opposed to any zoning change, any PRC overlay, or any conditional use permit for this block, which is in the very heart of our neighborhood.

This 14-story, Miami Beach-style condo building is totally inappropriate for our historic one- and two-story residential neighborhood. It is too tall, too dense, has too much traffic, and has too many unanswered questions. This building will tower more than 100 feet above any other house and be more than eight times as massive as any other home in our RD2 residentially-zoned neighborhood. You have seen our neighborhood photo album. Twenty-one of our neighbors' homes are only 21 feet to 162 feet away from the building site. This behemoth is not in scale, has no buffering, and has no relationship to the surrounding neighborhood.

Such a building will not be safe in our neighborhood. Our 100-year-old streets are too narrow for emergency and fire vehicles to get into, and the acute angle turns from Leake Avenue onto Short and Huso are difficult and dangerous. Even the garbage trucks are sometimes forced to back out of our streets. A hook-and-ladder truck would be hard-pressed to reach a fire, god forbid, on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of the Huso side of this building.

The additional parking for visitors and service vehicles will strain our resources. Adding more vehicles to Leake Avenue will worsen the traffic problems outlined in the "Audubon Park Master Plan," and the "Magazine Street Traffic Operations Analysis," which I will give to your staff.

Our century-old sewer pipes can barely carry our waste at the present time. Adding another 134 toilets to our street would severely stress our infrastructure. Getting water up

to the 14<sup>th</sup> story would strain our water system. With thunderstorms and hurricanes causing blackouts and local flooding, the strain of adding a 14-story building to our electrical grid and drainage system would be felt many blocks away.

This monstrosity would block out the air and the cool breeze coming off the levee. The loss of light and the ensuing gloom will kill our gardens and our spirits. The loss of our traditional backyard privacy with 67 new families peering down on our now smaller lives would be distressing.

Because of the enormity of the project and the lengthy construction process we are concerned over the decreased quality of our lives, along with the danger to the health, safety, and welfare of our community during the two years it would take to build it.

Today, I am providing your staff with a copy of our railroad engineer consultant's report. Stationing hundreds of people on Leake Avenue, 50 feet away from an active railroad line, which carries toxic materials and military supplies, represents an unacceptable risk to the lives of the residents who live in these high-rise buildings as well as to the financial stability of our railway system. These risks include chemical spills, explosions, fire, environmental contamination, and derailments.

The developer has talked about blight, safety, and the need for revitalization in our area. Our neighborhood is stable, has rising property values, and is one of the hottest real estate markets. The last house to sell on Short Street was involved in a bidding war.

Ten years ago our Blighted Properties List was long. Today, I will give your staff the addresses of 34 properties, which have been removed from the Blighted Properties List, along with pictures of 18 previously blighted homes, which are now renovated, back on the tax rolls and occupied by neighbors. All of this development was made possible because people knew their properties would be secure under the current RD2 zoning laws.

Our neighborhood is safe. I will provide your staff with our Uptown Triangle Police Patrol statistics, which demonstrates that of all the crime reported in the Uptown Triangle in 2003, only 5% was from our local neighborhood.

Building this 14-story brute will undo all of our progress. The ripple effect would be felt widely. Property values next to this building will plummet, and the area's tax base and millage will fall. You will turn owner-occupied properties into rental property. I am a small businessman. If you kick me off Short Street and I take my family to the North Shore, then my office staff, who have worked for me for 20 years in the mid-city area will be become unemployed and become a burden on our city.

This abomination is directly contrary to the City's Master Plan and the Land Use Plan. If you allow "spot zoning" for this project, then no neighborhood will ever again feel safe. Our trust will have been betrayed and no one will want to work on the Master Plan in the future.

We are sorry that our neighborhood did not have time to fully prepare for this meeting. We only received notice of this obnoxious project by accident, on New Year's Eve. We want to thank Lesley Alley and Ed Horan of the City Planning Commission staff for the help they have given our neighborhood in this time of need.

Even though we had inadequate notice from the developer, I wish to call your attention to the materials we have submitted for your review. In your packet of information there are 88 pages of petitions.

The number of signatures opposing this project – 779. The number of signatures in favor of this project – zero.

The number of letters, faxes, and emails addressed to the City Planning Commission, the City Council, and the Mayor's office in opposition to this project – 85. The number of letters, faxes, and emails in favor of this project - zero.

The number of letters from Presidents of surrounding neighborhood associations who oppose this project – 4. The number of presidential letters and neighborhood associations in favor of this project – zero.

In addition to those 779 signatures I am today submitting another 423 for your review. That is 1,202 signatures opposing this project in only two weeks.

These petitions and letters are historic votes of no confidence for this development and must be given serious consideration. Now I ask our urban planning and zoning expert, Steve Villavaso, to speak to you. (At this time Steve Villavaso discusses the legal arguments against this project, and then the speech continues.)

Franklin Adams, noted architect, has designed just one example of what an appropriate RD2 development on this block could look like. Here the height, mass, and architecture complement the surrounding neighborhood. We want neighbors who will greet us at street level. We do not want a vertical gated community cut off from the neighborhood.

According to the Constitution of the United States all power begins with “We the people...” We are the shareholders of this neighborhood and we are the shareholders of the City of New Orleans. There can be no compromise with such an outrageous proposal. My home on Short Street is already promised to my children and no one will take it away from me or my family. You cannot change my neighborhood's zoning solely to benefit one developer.

We ask that you listen to your conscience and your community's voice. The developer is talking only about money, but our neighborhood is talking about people. You must vote to deny this outrageous abomination. There is certainly a place for high-rise development in New Orleans, but Short Street is not the right place. This project will be a tombstone on our neighborhood. With our remaining time please listen to the voices of our neighbors who live only steps away from this project. (The neighbors begin to speak.)