

Neighbors First For Bywater General Meeting Minutes - November 1, 2017

The meeting was called to order by president Julie Jones at 7:11PM. There was a great turnout despite the nearby 2nd line parade and festivities commemorating the passing of Fats Domino.

Rick Prince spoke to the group first and encouraged everyone to take advantage of early voting for the November 18 election. He passed out flyers with more information. Early voting starts November 3rd and is available through November 11th (except the 5th and 10th), from 8:30am to 6pm at the following locations:

- City Hall – 1300 Perdido Street, Room 1W24.
- Algiers Courthouse – 225 Morgan Street, Room 105.
- Chef Menteur Voting Machine Warehouse Site – 8870 Chef Menteur Highway.
- Lake Vista Community Center – 6500 Spanish Fort Blvd.

Valerie Bouldin from the Neighborhood Engagement Office handed out information on their Neighborhood Summit, which is an all day event December 2nd at the University Medical Center. The event “brings neighborhood leaders and City agencies together to share information, develop new skills, and strengthen their relationships” by connecting residents with local businesses, non-profits, and city government. Registration and more information at nola.gov/summit, (504)658-4980, or text “NOLA Engage” to 468-311.

Matt Love and Judah Lea from Sea Cave Arcade (The Rec Center LLC) were then introduced. They are seeking a conditional use for their rented space at 3214 Burgundy (the old NOLA Playhouse) to operate a small aquatic themed arcade. The property is currently zoned HMC-1. The concept has been under development the last few years in a “speakeasy” capacity at a few locations in the neighborhood, and now they hope to go public. The plan is to have an employee at the door to charge a small cover for unlimited game playing on their custom video game consoles and pinball machines. This same employee can also be sure it does not get noisy on the street in front of the arcade. It will be all ages and no alcohol will be served, though it may be BYOB after 9PM, which would be the cutoff time for any unaccompanied minors. They do hope to have a small concessions setup for light snacks or refreshments. They will open at 4pm on weekdays and 12 noon weekends, and stay open until midnight (the original 2AM closing time was changed in consideration of concerns from near neighbors). Some treatment of the space (curtains, baffling) will be installed to insure noise levels are not an issue, and the games themselves are not very noisy. Concerns were raised regarding the conditional use permit, as it would remain with the building should the arcade ever move out, and the motives of the building owner are not known. It was suggested that the possibility of provisos could be looked into. Matt and Judah said they are usually in the space working in the evenings and neighbors were encouraged to knock on the door if they would like to meet or have any questions. They were thanked for their time and exemplary efforts to engage with the neighborhood.

City Councilmember elect Kristin Gisleson Palmer was then introduced to the group. Ms. Palmer won the October 14th election to represent District C by just over 100 votes, and she acknowledged that the election was not a mandate, and there would “need to be some healing”. She says regardless of how people voted she is determined to represent everyone in the district, as she was elected to do, and she wants to hit the ground running. She reminded everyone that Councilmember Ramsey is in office until May, and it is important for everyone to continue working with her and the current administration.

Mark Gonzales brought up an informative presentation on STRs that recently took place at the Marigny Opera House (?more info?) and encouraged Ms. Palmer to push for the current STR regulations “to have teeth”. Ms. Palmer wants to study the efforts of other cities to control the encroachment of tourism and commercialization of residential neighborhoods. She will need help from residents and suggests an STR committee for fact finding and gathering best practices. She referenced her past success with such a committee for her street improvement initiative, and said the STR issue is one of the biggest reasons she decided to run for the office again. She intends to insist the issue is revisited and regulations are improved, and acknowledged that it will be a challenge, though she thinks the new council will be responsive. Ideas included fining AirBnB for not sharing data and requiring commercialization of residential property (“whole home rentals”) to be confined to places already zoned commercial. This could also help alleviate some of the tax issues STRs are causing. Ms. Palmer made a point about capping the number of airbnb's per block. In the case of traditional licensed BnB's it's currently one per block face. Some confusion as to the definition of “whole home rentals” was also discussed - should half a double be considered a whole home by New Orleans standards? There was also discussion to consider what positive effects STRs may have, if any, on residential neighborhoods. Taxes seem insignificant, if they are paid at all, but it was suggested that in some cases it may be good for small neighborhood businesses, but that every neighborhood is different in this regard and should be studied as such. It was noted that legal Bed and Breakfast establishments pay more taxes and fees, and are more tightly regulated.

Concerns about the recent “wharf swap” were then discussed. The Port is exchanging the Governor Nichols Street and Esplanade Avenue wharves for the city owned Public Belt Railway, with the apparent goal of connecting Crescent Park with Waldenburg Park along the riverfront. It seems that little is known about what is actually planned. The mention of an “economic development district” could mean anything. Would there be concerts, vendors, or shopping malls? If a park is planned to connect Crescent Park with the French Quarter who will operate and maintain it? Is all of that included in the budget? A significant amount of tax money is currently funneled to the entities that operate the riverfront parks, are the funds properly utilized? There have certainly been some frustrations with the management of the Crescent Park.

Are residents seeing results from the increased city budget? How much of the hotel/motel tax should be going to the Convention Center and Superdome? The state controls the latter, and Ms. Palmer suggests these things should be investigated. She went on to

explain that when she was on the Council before she put out an annual report so that constituents could see where money was going and what work has been done.

A member brought up her concerns about the potential Cruise Ship Terminal at the Southeast corner of Bywater. Ms. Palmer said she is against it, and that there is a better place to consider on the West Bank in a neighborhood that would benefit from the economic development. Chalmette has a good place for it as well where it would be less disruptive, and they have apparently expressed interest.

Tyler Harwood asked what the process would be to suggest to city officials that Lee Circle be renamed for Fats Domino. Ms. Palmer didn't have a clear answer but seemed to like the idea, and mentioned that Jefferson Davis Boulevard would also be an excellent candidate for renaming. She suggested that getting more residents involved and organized would be a good start.

Ms. Palmer requested that neighborhood groups formally submit our input to her soon regarding what issues are most important to us and what we would like to see her work on most so we can work together. She stressed the importance of the work the neighborhood groups do and how important it is for our voices to be heard. She informed us of the Algiers Neighborhood Presidents Council (<http://www.anpcnola.org>) that they have on the West Bank. Leaders of all the neighborhood groups meet once a month. She encouraged us to do the same on the East Bank.

The meeting adjourned at 8:20PM.

Tyler Harwood
co-secretary