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Garden planned at Katrina levee breach site

By KEVIN MCGILL - Associated Press - Monday, August 25, 2014

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Nine years later, the street where Tom Lee used to live still looks like a hurricane hit it. But that may be about to change.

The concrete floodwall behind Lee's home at 5000 Warrington Drive gave way when Hurricane Katrina hit on Aug. 29, 2005. Water from the London Avenue Canal blasted through, knocking Lee's house into the street and submerging surrounding homes.

The floodwall has been repaired and strengthened but weedy empty lots and dilapidated, abandoned houses remain - a curiosity for tourists and an eyesore for the slowly repopulating working-class Gentilly neighborhood.

"It really looks bad," said Lee, now 93, who has resettled elsewhere in New Orleans. "It was a nice neighborhood. It really was."

"People are already coming here on a regular basis," Sandy Rosenthal, founder of the advocacy group Levees.org, said last week as she trudged up the earthen levee that leads to the base of the floodwall. "But now there will be something for them to see and something for them to understand about what happened here nine years ago."

Levees.org recently found the property in front of the London Avenue Canal breach site was available for lease, the result of a state agency's program to improve property acquired from owners, like Lee, who didn't return. Levees.org has leased 5000 Warrington for \$250 a year. The organization will unveil plans this week to turn it into a memorial garden with exhibits explaining the failure of federally built levees.

New Orleans loses one more pocket of stubborn post-Katrina blight.

"It's a win-win situation," said Rosenthal.

Katrina was blamed for more than 1,800 deaths, mostly in and around New Orleans. Dozens of levee breaches along canals contributed to flooding 80 percent of the city. Tens of thousands were stranded in sweltering heat in the Superdome and the city's convention center.

In post-Katrina lawsuits, a federal judge said the Army Corps of Engineers built a "tragically flawed" system but that the government agency was immune from liability.

Although the litigation is largely over, Levees.org has kept the issue alive, placing plaques at breach sites and trying to have at least two sites enshrined on the National Register of Historic Places.

"So many people died," Rosenthal said. "We consider it very important that people get the facts right about why New Orleans flooded."

Residents of the Gentilly neighborhood are looking forward to the new green space. The Rev. Lionel Davis, who lives nearby, doubts anyone would want to build a home so close to the levee and thinks a memorial garden is a good alternative.

"I think this is the beginning of something very bright and prosperous for the community" said Nick Harris, director of community development at nearby Dillard University.

Lee was more reserved when told about the garden. "It might help," he said. He's not sure he'll visit, though.

"Bad memories," said Lee, who suffered the death of his wife the year before the hurricane. He remembers returning from the Katrina evacuation in 2005 to find that most of what he owned was gone. "It just washed everything away."

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