

# West Bank Business Report

LOOKING BACK

## Algiers in transition

Historic West Bank city rides economic development tide over last 25 years

By **Tommy Santora**  
Associate Editor

YOU COULD SAY WHAT SPARKED economic development in Algiers over the past 25 years is all water under the bridge.

More precisely, a bridge over water.

The second phase of the Crescent City Connection was completed in 1988 allowing easier access for downtown visitors to historic Algiers on the West Bank.

Known previously for its tourist attractions along Algiers Point, Algiers took advantage of the bridge opening to grow into a city of diverse businesses, high-end residential development and improved recreation and tourism.

"The second span eased the traffic arteries considerably," said Mike Nolan, chairman and president of Fifth

The Riverfront in Algiers at the foot of Newton Street received a \$2 million renovation. A bike/walking trail and the top of the levee were paved in addition to a Jazz Walk of Fame constructed behind Mardi Gras World.

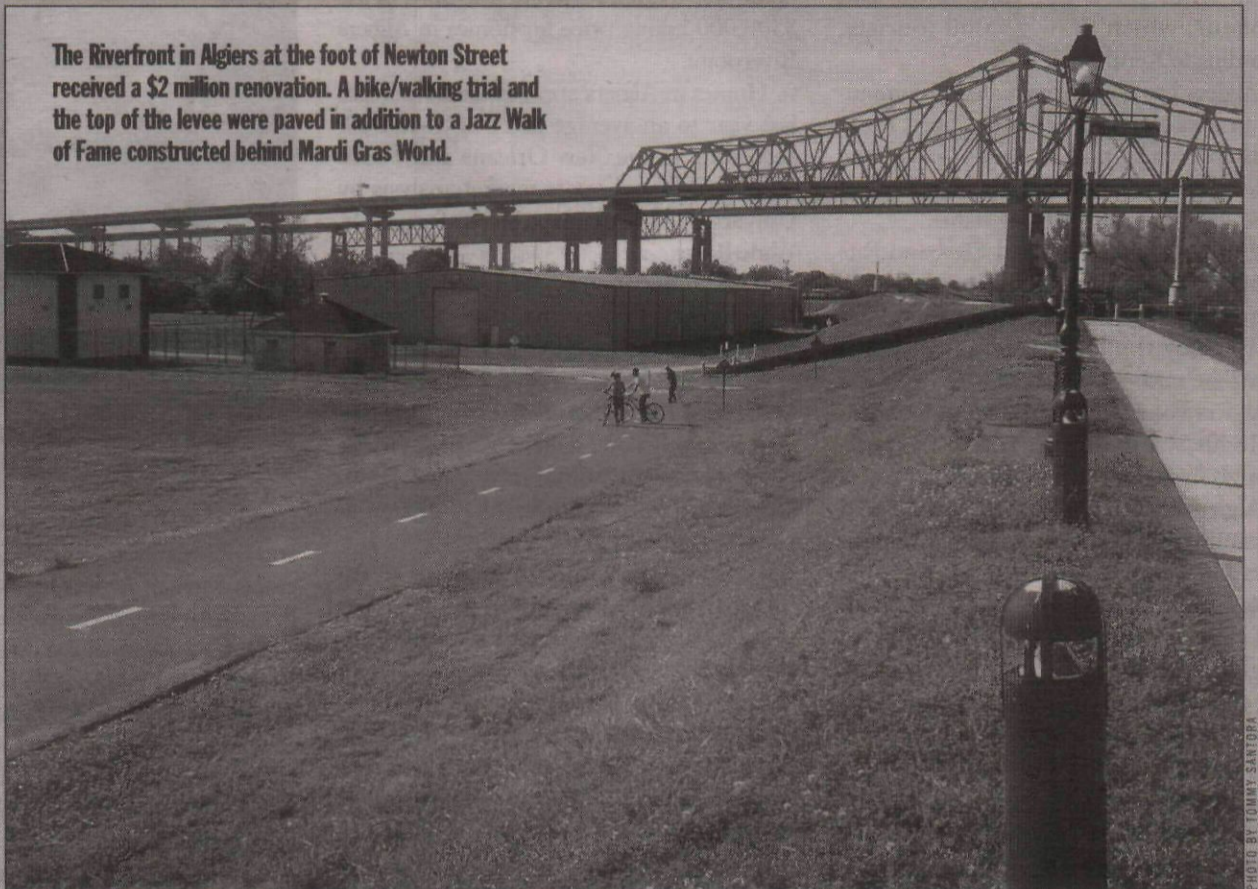


PHOTO BY TOMMY SANTORA

District Savings Bank, which opened in Algiers in 1926. "It made it accessible to live and work in Algiers. The development of English Turn came around the same time and the (Orleans Parish) School Board moved its headquarters to the West Bank. Businesses had a much better chance to do well. We were the first exit people would see when they came over here."

In 1980, Fifth District's headquarters measured just 1,500 square feet. Today, the bank's headquarters is a three-story, 24,000-square-foot building. Fifth District's assets are \$335 million compared with \$102 million in 1980.

"The '80s were an interesting time for Algiers because a lot of people and their jobs left the area because of the oil bust," said Nolan. "We all felt the economic jolt for a while but we gradually recovered. Housing prices became more affordable and we developed a more diverse economy with service businesses growing like Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World at Algiers Point, the Algiers Naval Support Activity center and other bank branches and stores up and down General DeGaulle (Drive)."

See **ALGIERS**, page 48

## Second Crescent City Connection causes big pain before great gain

By **Angelle Bergeron**  
Contributing Writer

THE SECOND span of the Crescent City Connection, which opened Sept. 30, 1988, unified the east and west banks of New Orleans in ways its predecessor failed to do 30 years prior.

The second Crescent City Connection span, parallel to and 400 feet downstream from what was then called the Greater New Orleans Bridge, helped traffic climb to a daily average of up to 100,000 vehicles, according to Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.

In 1987, 39 million vehicles a year crossed the bridge. Today, 63 million motor

over it annually.

Gretna Mayor Ronnie Harris recalls picking pecans on Columbus Street outside his grandfather's home with construction of the first span of the bridge as a backdrop.

"The city of Gretna was an instrumental force in getting the bridge built," Harris said. "I recall seeing photos of Mayor (William) White and Sen. (Alvin) Stumpf on a pile driver on the bridge."

When the bridge opened in 1958, it had an "incredible" impact on the growth of Gretna, which was the only West Bank city with a water plant, sewer plant and streets, Harris said.

Gretna grew so quickly that Harris' parents moved to Timberlane in 1967 and surrounding suburbs like Terrytown began to spring up. "People liked the rural area, away from the city," he said.



PHOTO BY TOMMY SANTORA

In 1989, the Louisiana Legislature reinstated tolls to pay for the second span of the Crescent City Connection. The tolls will end by 2012, according to Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division.

The gridlock on the GNO bridge was brutal during peak hours, Harris says.

"When they would have one fender bender on the bridge, it would back up traffic for miles," he said.

West Bank Realtor Jack Stumpf recalls how quickly things changed when the bridge linked his world to the East Bank.

See **CCC**, page 48

**ALGIERS***continued from page 47*

Kern estimates more than 150,000 people a year visit Mardi Gras World, which showcases nearly 80 percent of the floats used during the Carnival season. Three days out of the year, Mardi Gras World displays floats from Bacchus, Endymion and Orpheus, which draw 25,000 tourists, according to Kern.

"Algiers has gone from a sleepy community to a walking tour of history," said Kern, whose recent \$2 million project paved the top of the levee and added a Jazz Walk of Fame and a Louis Armstrong statue.

"I want to eventually add Elvis and Fats Domino statues down the river but now people can ride their bikes up there and really enjoy the levee setting at Algiers Point," he said.

Algiers Point, filled with homes dating to the 1840s, was the site of a residential breakthrough in 2001 when construction began on Algiers Riverpoint, a \$43 million gated community with 80 single-family homes, parks and recreation areas.

Residential prices reach \$300,000, about 100 condos sell for up to \$400,000 and roughly 30,000 square feet of commercial and office space are available. Algiers Point residents hope the commercial space will jumpstart more business along Patterson

Drive where businesses historically have flopped, said Greg Molchan, president of the Algiers Point Association.

The Algiers Riverpoint homes are selling well above the average price of other homes in Algiers, according to the New Orleans Metropolitan Association of Realtors. Last year, the average selling price of an Algiers home was \$110,240, about one-third of the \$300,000 asking price for homes in Algiers Riverpoint.

Homes in Algiers appreciated 20 percent last year to an average price of \$143,000, according to the New Orleans and South Central Gulf real estate market analysis by University of New Orleans professor Dr. Wade Ragas.

That appreciation comes at no surprise to John Savage, general manager of English Turn Golf and Country Club since 1995.

Savage said English Turn houses range between \$400,000 and \$1.4 million and approximately \$300 million of real estate has been sold in the community since 1989. Last year, English Turn had \$41 million in sales, Savage said.

David Giglio, owner of Frames Inc. on Kabel Drive, said he moved his business near English Turn to gain a higher-end client base.

"Approximately 15 years ago, we changed to a high-end gift shop and we have since then targeted the high-end consumer,"



Mardi Gras World owner Blaine Kern estimates more than 150,000 people a year visit the tourist attraction on Newton Street.

Giglio said. "A lot of businesses open here and fail because they cater just to the lower-end consumer. Algiers has a better economy than that and business owners fail to see it."

One function of the Algiers Economic Development Foundation is retaining businesses in Algiers. That wasn't always easy, according to Belinda Little-Wood, former AEDF executive director and now president for Algiers-based Newtek Community Financial Services.

"In the 1980s, Algiers was the stepchild of the city in terms of economic development," she said. "We started the AEDF in 1991 and it was all volunteer with no out-source funding. We put together a community plan, 150 pages and 15 goals of what we wanted to accomplish to improve the quality of life in Algiers."

"Our economy was just recovering and the second phase of the bridge opened up unbelievable access to Algiers and allowed us the kinds of things we had to market like transportation time from downtown to attract the kind of retail development we wanted."

Little-Wood said AEDF started receiving \$200,000 a year in federal money in 2000 for clean-up campaign banners along General DeGaulle Drive, annual clean-up

events, networking meetings with businesses and the installation this past year of Kathy Lynn Honaker, the first full-time AEDF executive director.

Tyrone Hubbard, president of the AEDF, said another priority of the organization has been working closely with the Algiers Development District and other city political leaders to save the Naval Support Activity base. The NSA, which employs about 4,600 military and civilian workers with an annual payroll around \$142 million, faces closure this May when the Department of Defense announces its Base Realignment Closure results. The Department of Defense plans to close about 25 percent of its 400 military bases nationwide.

Other AEDF projects include a riverfront study to enhance business development along the river, and also the renovation of the Behrman Sports Complex on Behrman Highway into a facility with soccer, Babe Ruth tournament-style baseball fields and basketball courts for possible Amateur Athletic Union tournaments.

"If we can develop this complex, then it would give us a chance to keep some of those events here for our kids," Hubbard said. "There's a wealth of opportunity out there."\*



The English Turn Golf and Country Club has attracted high-end real estate development in Algiers since 1989.

**CCC***continued from page 47*

Stumpf said his life has followed a convoluted path along Louisiana Highway 23, from his childhood home on Lafayette Street to his current residence in Timberlane. He recalls taking the Jackson Avenue ferry and two or three buses every morning to reach classes at St. Aloysius at the corner of Esplanade Avenue and Rampart Street.

"Most people thought I got in a canoe and paddled home once I crossed the ferry and they were surprised we had roads over here," he said.

Stumpf also recalls the traffic jams that developed regularly shortly after he got into the real estate business in 1963.

The Greater New Orleans Bridge had only been open for three years when Bill

Conway moved to New Orleans in 1961. It wasn't long before the span designed to facilitate passage between the east and west banks became a hindrance to commuters.

"Gov. (John) McKeithen ran on the basis that he would remove the tolls on the bridge and they say that's what won him the election," said Conway, chairman of Modjeski and Masters, the Harrisburg, Pa.-based consulting engineers on the design team for both bridges. In lieu of tolls, the state paid the bridge authority a yearly stipend to cover the bond debt, he said. Removing the tolls initially improved traffic flow on the bridge but it also increased the number of cars taking the route.

"Traffic went from say 35,000 vehicles per day to about 55,000 in just a week or so and then went right up from there to capacity, which was 60,000 to 65,000," Conway says. "The commuter time and experience

**Toll collections due to end by 2012**

Crescent City Connection commuters know the West Bank toll plaza as part of their daily drive.

But more than two decades of commuters had a free ride across the bridge.

In 1964, Gov. John McKeithen suspended toll collection. In place of the tolls, the state paid the bridge authority an annual stipend to pay off the bond debt.

Before then, tolls and bond money were used to finance the bridge, which opened in 1958.

"The original toll rates were 35 cents per passenger or per axle for trucks, buses and so forth, each way," said Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. Less than one year later, tolls were reduced to 30 cents before McKeithen eliminated them.

Traffic nearly doubled with the tolls gone from about 35,000 vehicles a day to its capacity of about 65,000, according to bridge engineers.

In 1989, the state Legislature reinstated tolls to pay for the second span of the bridge. The toll finances debt on outstanding bonds as well as maintenance and operation, Paisant said.

"Current legislation calls for that toll to end by December 2012," he said.

In 1989, the round-trip toll was 50 cents per passenger vehicle or axle or \$1 for a round-trip. The rate was reduced to 35 cents with the introduction of toll tags and eventually 20 cents per axle.

"The toll tag rate right now is less than the rates on the original bridge in 1958," Paisant said.\*

—Angelle Bergeron

became a nightmare for people."

The Mississippi River Bridge Authority

tried to speed the flow of traffic by posting police officers at each access ramp during

peak times, Conway said.

"Whether or not you could go on a ramp, say Camp Street, was determined by a policeman," he said. "This had the effect of passing more traffic but it still meant people had to wait."

In spite of the traffic, the bridge is responsible for a previously non-existent contiguous community on the West Bank, said Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.

"The bridge is most definitely the life-line of the West Bank," he said. "Before the bridge, Algiers, Gretna, Marrero and Westwego were all individual communities along the river and Fourth Street was the main drag, if you can imagine that."

Nine ferries transported motorists from these communities but there was no city center on the West Bank. The Huey P. Long Bridge, which opened in 1935, didn't provide a viable alternative to downtown because it was so far away.

"If there was no bridge connecting downtown New Orleans to the West Bank, none of these communities would be what they are today," Paisant said.

As traffic mounted, it became clear a new bridge was needed for the West Bank to grow. In 1973, consultants began exploring options, including expanding the existing structure and building a new span, possibly at Press Street or Napoleon Avenue.

Planners decided in 1978 to build the second span next to the bridge, Conway said.

"The conclusion was that location would cause the least amount of environmental damage and the least disruption through established neighborhoods."

One of the primary challenges was maintaining already strained traffic flow during construction.

"That new construction devastated our community economically but it was a case of short-term pain for long-term gain," Harris said. "Now we have improved access to the whole community and you know what they say about location, location, location. My office is literally 12 minutes away from downtown New Orleans."

U.S. Census Bureau figures support Harris. From 1980 to 1990, Gretna's population dropped 15 percent, from 20,615 to 17,208. However, between 1990 and 2000, Gretna gained 1.3 percent in population back to 17,431.

Whereas development of the Westbank Expressway drained business initially from Huey P. Long Avenue and 5th Streets, overall growth has since been slow and steady, Stumpf said. "It was not until the late '90s that the impact (of the second span) was really felt," he said.

East Bank residents eventually started pumping money into the West Bank community.

The Oakwood Shopping Center and stores like Home Depot, Sam's and Wal-Mart began attracting East Bank customers who now found it easier to cross the river rather than head west toward Metairie.

### Crescent City Connection posts fifth-highest U.S. traffic volume

When Gov. John McKeithen lifted the toll on the Greater New Orleans Bridge in 1964, traffic jumped in one week from 35,000 automobiles a day to about 55,000, said Bill Conway, chairman of the board of Modjeski and Masters, Harrisburg, Pa.-based consulting engineers for the bridge project.

After opening the second span in 1988, traffic steadily climbed to the average daily traffic range of 90,000 to 100,000.

"Both spans should easily support 150,000 average daily traffic with a fairly good level of service," Conway said.

Traffic flow is typically rated on a scale ranging from free flowing or an "A," to a standstill or an "F," he said.

"In an urban environment, if you can achieve C all the time, you are doing pretty well," he said.

But anyone who routinely crosses the bridges knows one little mishap can still cause long delays.

"Anytime there is a hiccup, a minor fender bender, breakdown, flat tire, anything that causes a backup at that peak time in the morning, we have a serious traffic situation," said Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.

But the delays are never as bad as they were before the second span opened.

"I am told by the engineers that moving traffic capacity for the two spans is 2,000 vehicles per lane per hour and that is moving free flow," Paisant said. "Right now, between 6:30 a.m. and 8 a.m., which is our heaviest time of day, is routinely 10,000 vehicles. That means, at four lanes, we are exceeding the theoretical capacity of the bridge at that time."

Paisant says the twin spans are sufficient at non-peak times but the corridor is still full. "The only other (area) in the state that has more volume than we are doing here is the I-10/I-610 corridor in Metairie," he said. "And as far as toll bridges are concerned, we carry one of the highest traffic volumes for toll bridges in the United States."

The only U.S. bridges carrying more volume are the double-decker Oakland Bay Bridge in San Francisco and the George Washington, Tri-Borough and Verizano Narrows bridges in the New York area, he said. •

—Angelle Bergeron

"People from Faubourg Marigny and Lakeview began coming to shop, primarily because of the free flow of traffic due to the second span," Stumpf said.

Commercial property, although it hasn't reached the \$50 to \$60 per square foot values of Veterans Highway, has increased to \$20 to \$30 per square foot on Manhattan Boulevard.

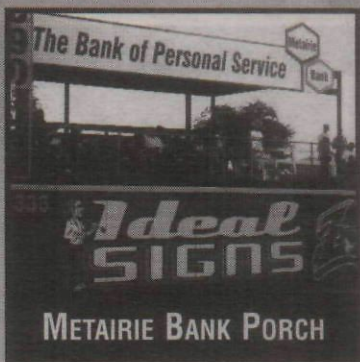
Conway said insurmountable traffic would have eventually killed downtown New Orleans.

"By keeping the commute reasonable, I think it has kept the downtown area viable and preserved," he said. "If you can't commute there in a reasonable time, it's going to die, and I think the city fathers all realized that." •

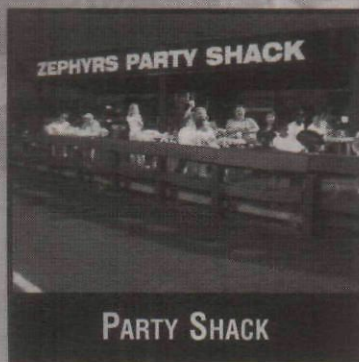


## New Orleans Zephyrs Baseball

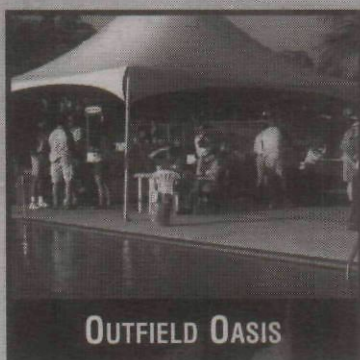
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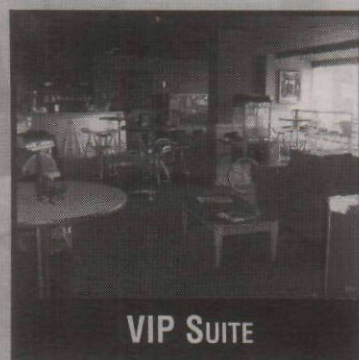
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