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Lower 9th takes step toward recovery

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NEW ORLEANS — In what she termed a “major breakthrough,” New Orleans City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis announced Wednesday that electricity, potable water and temporary trailers soon will be coming to parts of the Lower 9th Ward, much of which was ravaged by hurricanes Katrina’s and Rita’s flood waters.

Willard-Lewis, whose district includes the Lower 9th, said Entergy New Orleans is prepared to hook up electrical connections, the city Sewerage & Water Board plans to begin delivering safe drinking water in two to three weeks, and FEMA contractors will be ready to hook up hundreds of trailers.

Willard-Lewis said “thousands” of Lower 9th residents have expressed a desire to return to the neighborhood and 500 have requested trailers. The trailers can go on front lawns, side lawns or at group sites centered on churches, she said.

“We have a plan today. It focuses on the people’s right to return to the Lower 9th Ward,” Willard-Lewis, flanked by clergy and community leaders, said during a news conference at City Hall. There are 15,000 to 17,000 homes in the Lower 9th, she said.

The Lower 9th Ward, east of the Industrial Canal, was heavily damaged by the hurricanes when the canal levee breached during both storms. The entire Lower 9th is open only for what Mayor Ray Nagin calls “look and leave” visitation, meaning residents can return to see the extent of damage to their property and gather personal effects. Visitation hours are 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. The city’s Internet site says the Lower 9th’s sewerage system is inoperative, water is not potable, electric service is available to less than 25 percent of the area’s customers and gas service is available to only 3 percent.

Entergy New Orleans spokeswoman Beth Raley, who attended the news conference, said a particularly hard-hit six-block area of the Lower 9th on the lake side of North Claiborne Avenue where a barge came through the levee breach will not have available electric service for the foreseeable future.

Overall, Raley said, roughly 95 percent of the city can take electricity when homes are safe to do so and 86 percent can take gas service when homes are ready for it. Last month alone, she said, Entergy connected more than 3,400 trailers across the city.

Willard-Lewis said the Lower 9th has faced four major obstacles: electricity, drinkable water, debris removal and sewerage service.

“We are busting through the obstacles,” she said, noting that the neighborhood is being cleaned up.

The Sewerage & Water Board, in conjunction with the state, hopes to test and certify the water from Derbigny Street south to the river in the next two to three weeks, Willard-Lewis said.

Reporters asked her if it is wise to try to move ahead in the Lower 9th when FEMA’s new flood maps have not been released and Nagin’s Bring New Orleans Back Commission has not issued its final report.

“We are focusing on the plan of the people,” she said. “We are not going to be sidetracked.”

Willard-Lewis, who noted that too much of New Orleans, particularly the 9th Ward, resembles a “disaster zone,” said roadblocks and delays and excuses are no longer acceptable.

“We are building on the invitation to bring New Orleans back,” she said, adding that the rebuilding will be a “long-term process.”

Willard-Lewis, though, said the recovery has been “much too slow.”

“Get out of the way. Remove the roadblocks,” she said.

Bishop J.E. Daniels, a minister in the Lower 9th Ward, said members of his congregation who are scattered across the country in Atlanta and Memphis, Tenn., are “hurting” and “bleeding” but want to return home.

“We’re here to say that we’re coming back,” he said at the news conference. “We’re not going to stand on the sideline and wait. We’re going to stand firm and get our people back.”

As for the recovery, Daniels said, “I think we should have moved this process faster. I think they’re (government officials) dragging their feet.”

Rev. Errol Dyson, another Lower 9th minister, said he has been holding services in the Lower 9th for about a month.

“We have property here. This is our home. We don’t have to ask to come home. It’s our right,” he said. Dyson said his church on Forstall Street does not have electricity, but Holy Cross Middle School half a block away has power. Several trailers are hooked up in the Holy Cross area, he said.

Dyson said many Lower 9th residents feel their neighborhood has been placed at the “bottom of the totem pole.”

“It’s becoming offensive to many of those who want to come home,” he said.

Mary Fontenot, executive director of All Congregations Together, or ACT, spoke for the Lower 9th “homeowners who are homeless.”

“Our No. 1 effort is to see our people back in their homes,” she said.

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