FROM EUGENE CIZEK

I oppose the decision made by the City Planning Commission at the June 26th meeting in favor of zoning adjustments to support the building proposal for 501 Elisio Lofts, 501 Elysian Fields Avenue. Prior to review by the CPC, the proposal was presented to the HDLC and received a 2 to 1 recommendation from the Architectural Review Committee. The dissenting member of this vote was Marigny resident, historic architect and devoted citizen Rick Fifield who has been actively involved in the Historic District Landmarks Commission (H DLC) and the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association (FMIA). After review of the project, HDLC Director Elliott Perkins recommended that the plans be sent to the City Planning Commission before further action was taken because of the required zoning waivers deemed necessary by the developer for the project.

On June 26th, the City Planning Commission received an embellished and inaccurate report from property developer Sean Cummings. This included verbal support on the beauty of the project from various people, many of whom do not reside in Faubourg Marigny or who are not full time residents. Afterwards, the City Planning Commission inexplicably voted to approve these zoning changes, despite significant opposition from a group of full time Marigny residents voicing their disapproval of the project based on zoning law.

Despite Mr. Cummings’ suggestions, I have never given my approval for the design proposed at 501 Elysian Fields. At the CPC meeting, Mr. Cummings extended his gratitude to me for critiquing and evaluating his proposal for Elisio Lofts. As I was unable to attend the meeting, I was incapable of responding to this remark in person. I have participated in three critiques presented to the FMIA, during all of which several suggestions were made to improve the three-dimensional qualities of the design. In addition, all three critiques generated consistent remarks to lower the height to reflect the 50 foot limit and provide appropriate parking for residential and commercial units. During all three meetings, the majority of FMIA members present voted not to approve the waivers requested by Mr. Cummings. After each meeting, Mr. Cummings agreed to consider changes to the proposal based on these suggestions. Upon each review to follow, the plans remained completely unaltered.

These revisions are vital to maintaining the historic integrity of Faubourg Marigny, as well as surrounding historic neighborhoods. There has been no comprehensive transportation study that defines the impact of this increased density on the immediate and future quality of life and historic context of the neighborhoods that front the river. The FMIA has repeatedly brought this issue to the attention of planning officials, our elected officials and the city in general, as parking is an incredible problem in both the Marigny Triangle and Rectangle. While in the future, our public transportation system might be so improved as to lessen the need for personal vehicles, that time has not been defined or planned for; nor is there economic support for such enhanced public transportation systems. We must embrace the past of our neighborhoods, live for today, and plan both short-range and future demands of the area. Excessive parking buildings and lots can always be turned into new multi-use developments should the time come when such density calls for this and public transit systems exist to support such density. The current parking requirements for the inner-city historic neighborhoods reflect the realistic needs for today and the near future. The change in requirements for residential parking from 1.5 to 1 per unit is disruptive to the historic Marigny neighborhood for multiple reasons. The present parking problem will be immediately exacerbated by the insufficient parking in denser buildings. Lowering parking requirements will also have a waterfall effect on the neighborhood. Less parking requirements encourage higher density, which in turn results in smaller dwelling sizes available at general rents for the predominante public. This further encourages increases in density, and higher values for every new development thereafter. This extreme increase in value will create unaffordable pricing for the middle and working class that has supported the Faubourg Marigny since its establishment in 1806.

Mr. Cummings hopes to support his proposal with passages from the 2005 Riverfront Redevelopment Plan, a plan that he helped create. For example, the Riverfront Plan recommends that heights be changed at certain nodal points such as Elysian Fields, a statement that was never recommended by the FMIA or Planning District 7. Furthermore, it was never indicated in the Riverfront
2005 Plan that these nodal points were to be expanded to other locations throughout the historic urban core districts. The addition of 75 foot height limitations at all of these nodal points would only serve to change the overall historic context in Faubourg Marigny and provide an unwanted precedent for future development in the Marignys, Bywater, Holy Cross and Treme. This development would create a new level of high rise; for Faubourg Marigny, that means anything over 50 feet. Development along the river at a 75 foot height limits the views towards the river for the low-rise residential areas of the neighborhood. During planning processes to develop the master plan and comprehensive zoning ordinances, at all times before and after Katrina, the neighborhood planning districts unanimously supported 50 foot height limitations. Architects and developers from Reinventing the Crescent all proposed high-rise solutions to the New Orleans Riverfront, forever changing the face and quality of life within the neighborhoods. The proposed amendments made by the City Planning Commission Staff for the current Master Plan Zoning were utilized in deciding on their recommendation of the zoning waivers for the Elisio Lofts Project; these new amendment have not been approved and therefore do not represent a logical reasoning process for making decision. The Master Plan and its Comprehensive Zoning were supposed to stop the process of spot zoning.

The current zoning was created in the 70s to correct the previous zoning from the 60s that allowed for the construction of insensitive, denser high-rise structures with no relation to the historic fabric of their surroundings. In response to high-rise developments such as Christopher Inn, the residents of Faubourg Marigny working with the City Planning Staff and Commission and the City Council changed the zoning laws to prevent future like-minded designs. Christopher Inn has neither balconies nor galleries to allow the residents the important inner-connection between their indoor and outdoor life. It is the three-dimensional quality of the historic New Orleans building that creates the kind of comfort and sustainability qualities that can only be found in the layering of historic structures. New construction in these historic settings should not only adhere to the 50 foot height limit, or lower as the individual setting requires; they should also have a three-dimensional façade quality.

New Orleans’ landscape is one of horizontality. If you study the pivotal works of contemporary urban designers such as Kevin Lynch (MIT and Image of the City) and Ian McHarg (University of Pennsylvania and Design with Nature), you will find that the vertical element of the landscape takes on far greater significance in forming the visual and functional image of an area as it grows taller in respect to its adjacent structures. Therefore the argument that Elysian Fields can support taller buildings simply because it is a wider street is fallacious. This attitude displayed by the city’s planners and leaders shows a lack of understanding for the inner workings of city design, image building, contextual management, and the precepts of contemporary growth and management programs as exemplified by the Downtown Development District. This program was initiated in New Orleans in 1976, and has proved invaluable to guiding the economic growth of the city while maintaining its sense of place and good design. Both Lynch and McHarg were professors, mentors, and professional colleagues of mine. They influenced several generations of the best professionals in the US and globally. Their books are still considered to be basic to the education of many architects, landscape architects, planners and urban designers around the world.

The original idea for a study of Faubourg Marigny to study zoning as a preservation tool came from Harold Katner, the director of the City Planning Commission in the early 1970s.

I strongly oppose the proposal to change the Historic Marigny Zoning height limit of 50 feet to 75 feet and parking requirements from 1.5 to 1 per dwelling unit, as well as the elimination of parking requirements for commercial spaces. These issues have been discussed with Jackie Clarkson and Kristin Palmer. Both have given verbal support to maintaining the wishes of the Faubourg
Marigny residents. These residents and Historic Marigny Zoning have created one of the finest and most relevant historic urban neighborhoods in the US as recognized by the American Planning Association in 2009. All of our riverfront neighborhoods as they are today are the result of heavy legwork done by concerned citizens and public officials. This recommendation of mine is based upon over forty years of working, living and caring about this city through both my teaching and professional work in the US and international locations.

By increasing the height limit to 75 feet, we are not only setting a precedent for building height or parking requirements; we are also setting a precedent for a city government that undermines the opinions of its residents and refuses to uphold decisions made by the neighborhood planning districts. My opposition to the proposed 501 Elisio Lofts development is primarily rooted in the dangerous precedent it will set if constructed as presently designed, allowing future buildings greater than 50 feet in height to compromise the quality of life in the Marigny Historic District and historic districts throughout New Orleans.