The Redevelopment of Freret Street

Robert Morris of Uptown Messenger on how Freret reinvented itself without splitting longtime residents and new neighbors

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PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

What's different on Freret?

When more than 100 Freret Street neighbors gathered in the Samuel J. Green Charter School cafeteria in March to discuss a proposal to use a property-tax fee to hire private security guards for the area, the meeting had every appearance of a textbook example of gentrification. Two white people sat at a table marked "FOR," two African-Americans sat at a table marked "AGAINST," and a room full of other black residents argued bitterly against what they saw as the secrecy of the proposal, about their sense of disenfranchisement amid an influx of "new residents" and about the rising costs of merely remaining in their homes.

Given the explosion of commercial growth on Freret Street — from a single restaurant four years ago to 14 blocks of highly-lauded cuisine, entertainment venues and businesses ranging from a dog groomer to a craft-cocktail lounge — concerns about gentrification should be expected. But after that heated meeting in March, proponents and opponents literally walked down the sidewalk together, relying on relationships and respect forged over decades to find a middle ground — suggesting that, perhaps, something is different about what's happening on Freret.

Named for former Mayor William Freret, the street boasted a streetcar and dozens of shops in the 1920s and '30s, but it became a casualty of suburban sprawl and white flight, hitting its nadir with the murder of baker Bill Long Jr. in his Freret Street shop in 1987. Various revitalization efforts have been underway for years, but they began to take off after the floodwaters following the levee failures receded. In 2009, Cure, Beaucoup Juice, Sarita's Grill, Village Coffee and Freret Street Po-Boys and Donuts all opened; by 2011, restaurants were on nearly every block and residents of the city were taking note of the Freret renaissance.

A quarter of all restaurants fail in their first year, and about 60 percent by the third year, so statistically Freret should have had some casualties by now. All its new restaurants are still open, however — but that doesn't mean there haven't been some close calls.

Sarita Fernandez opened Sarita's Grill in July of 2009 — the only restaurant open on the street at the time. "We always believed that Freret was going to come back," she says. As her lease renewal approached this year, she began getting nervous.

"I was stressed because so many people are trying to buy properties, that an investor would come by, somebody that has money in their pocket," Fernandez says. "That was the scary part, because I noticed a lot of people were trying to buy buildings." Fernandez credits a fair-minded landlord with offering a renewal price she could afford, and now she and her husband are trying to buy the building themselves.

Fernandez's fears are being felt by a growing number of residents, says Stan Norwood of Dennis Barber Shop, a longstanding institution on the street. It's the classic pattern of gentrification — an influx of new residents driving up property values and rents, making it hard for older residents to keep their homes.

One disabled neighbor of Norwood's, for example, already has protested his increased property tax once, because his house hasn't changed and his income is fixed. This year, two more houses are under construction in the block, valued at more than $400,000 each, according to Norwood. "Now that we have two houses sold in his block, we're expecting it to go up a little higher," Norwood says. "I don't know how he can hold on to his house on a fixed income."

Despite the redevelopment boom, however, Norwood says he doesn't actually know anyone who has had to move out of the neighborhood because they no longer could afford it. He named five or six families who are struggling to stay in their homes for various reasons, but says, "They haven't moved as of yet, but they're struggling with the situation."

Part of the reason is because there is so much available abandoned housing stock — a feature of a once-weak housing market, says Tulane geographer Richard Campanella. In markets characterized by blight and disuse, like New Orleans in the recent past, any development is viewed as positive — unlike "strong markets" like New York and San Francisco, where new projects in dense environments necessitate displacement of the original residents.

"People aren't getting put out of their houses because some developer from Boston wants to come and make something new here," agrees Greg Ensslen, whose Go Mango renovation company has been involved in dozens of residential and commercial projects in the neighborhood. "There's enough abandoned property that we can have a revolution here without having to put anybody out," he says. "We haven't seen it yet."

'Yet' may be the operative word, in New Orleans and on Freret, Campanella says.

"What's happening in New Orleans, since around 2008, is that we are slowly emerging from the depths of the 'weak market' group, and the small amount of (mostly welcome) gentrification that we used to have, is now becoming not so small, and not so welcome," Campanella wrote in an email. "Marigny and Bywater are at the cusp of this transition, but places like Freret are starting to feel it next."

Residents support the development, says Andrew Amacker, president of the Freret Neighbors United community group, in part because they explicitly asked for it. After Hurricane Katrina, the neighborhood had a number of gatherings to envision its own future, and the common desire was for a diverse, walkable community with a vibrant economy at its core. People wanted more retail than the restaurants that have led the way, but for the most part Freret looks like the residents wanted it to, he says.

"This not something that's being done against our will," Amacker says. "This is something that we decided on."

Meanwhile, Ensslen says, all the property owners are benefiting. For most families, the home is their primary asset — and if it's in the Freret area, it's almost certainly worth more than its original purchase price.

While most of the businesses in the Freret revolution are new to New Orleans, their proprietors are not. Sarita's building housed "La Cocinita Escondida" ("The Little Hidden Kitchen") before Hurricane Katrina, operated by Sarita Fernandez's mother. Cure founder Neal Bodenheimer and Company Burger owner Adam Biderman are Isidore Newman graduates; Steve Watson's Kingpin, on the other side of St. Charles Avenue, already was well-established when he opened Midway Pizza. Ancora and The High Hat were expansions of Adolfo Garcia's New Orleans restaurant empire, and Origami chef Mitsuko Tanner is a veteran of the city's sushi scene. Constantine Georges, who owns Dat Dog, is the brother of businessman John Georges, who owns The Advocate.

"It's indigenous," says Ensslen, who moved to Freret in late 1988 while he was at Tulane School of Architecture. "It's people from within the community making things happen. There hasn't been the wholesale displacement of people. There's not the animosity."

Norwood agrees. At the big meeting about the security-district proposal, he sat at the "Against" table while Michelle Ingram of Zeus' Place sat at the "For" table. One reason they were able to move immediately from that controversial night into a

collaborative discussion of solutions, Norwood says, is that he and Ingram are neighbors. Likewise, Norwood says, Ensslen is well-regarded by older residents because they have seen him working for Freret's renewal for 25 years.

"Greg has been a person who has been around here for years," Norwood says. "He wasn't trying to run anybody off. I've got a lot of respect for him."

Employment is a traditional point of contention as new businesses open in gentrifying neighborhoods. The residents have to put up with parking headaches surrounding hot new eateries, but are they directly partaking in, or benefiting from, the increase in commercial activity?

Ensslen says he can name a number of people from the neighborhood who have gotten jobs in the businesses, and he doesn't know anyone who has been turned away. Biderman says Company Burger has three neighborhood residents on staff. "They were great applicants; they were the greatest people," Biderman says. "Our guys from the neighborhood are amazing."

One of those workers, Erone Hymel, has lived in the Freret area for 35 years. "I think it's open doors for opportunity for the neighborhood," he says. "I think people around here appreciate that they can walk up here and see businesses that are running,instead of seeing abandoned buildings."

Another way Freret may defy stereotypical patterns of gentrification may be in the structure of the new families. Earlier this year, Tulane geographer Richard Campanella wrote a lengthy discussion of the pattern of gentrification in his own neighborhood, the Marigny/Bywater area. Among his greatest concerns was the lack of children being born around him; young, bohemian first-wave gentrifiers rarely have children — and when and if they do, they move away to areas with more and better schools. After they leave, prices have risen too high for other young parents, and the neighborhood "grows gray," Campanella writes; gone are the children who "might represent the neighborhood's best hope of remaining down-to-earth."

Freret, by contrast, has many children, which Campanella suggested may partly be a natural result of higher nativity rates in Freret than in the downtown historic districts. The majority of the new business owners who live and work on the corridor have kids, and the neighborhood contains and is surrounded by some of the better schools in the city.

So if things are going so well, why did the security district proposal hit such a nerve in the community?

One reason is monetary, Norwood says. Rising property values don't put more money in homeowners' pockets, so if they're already beginning to struggle with the tax bill each year, any increase is going to be unwelcome, he says.

But another issue strikes deeper. The neighborhood association, usually a small group, has attracted some "newer" residents who have been on the corridor for five to 10 years, rather than 30 to 60. Though gunshots still ring out at night from time to time, the neighborhood actually seems safer in terms of actual attacks on people than it has in years to those longest-term residents, Norwood says. So to be taxed to place armed security in the hands of relative newcomers who don't know the neighbors, and don't know the neighbors' teenage children or grandchildren, Norwood says, creates a sense of indignation — and apprehension.

Talking about the situation while cutting hair, Norwood gestures at the TV playing in the corner, still dominated by fallout from George Zimmerman's acquittal in the Trayvon Martin shooting. For residents, he says, now is not a good time to be discussing inviting strangers in to police the streets. "We're not saying the neighborhood is squeaky clean, but it's nowhere close to the way it used to be," Norwood says of the Freret crime situation. "It's New Orleans. It's not a cakewalk. If this neighborhood was so bad, why would you want to move here?"

Another problem, says Norwood (who also builds and renovates homes in the neighborhood) is that public policy in New Orleans actually seems to FAVOR the newcomers. Getting blighted property "back into commerce" is now as tiresome a phrase as it is laudable a goal. Tax sales are well-publicized and seminars are held for people looking for property to acquire. But on the other end of those code-enforcement actions are real people, Norwood says, New Orleanians who may well still be trying to come home, but who are battling complicated inheritance disputes, financial challenges or long commutes back to town as they slowly move forward with renovations. These people, he says, have never heard of the historic tax credits or other benefits that the new residents are using for renovations.

"The welcome mat is rolled out to the people from everywhere else," Norwood says. "It's not rolled out to the people who are already here."

Before "The New Freret" rose to prominence, another group was founded with many of the same goals — the Uptown Swingers second line group, which first paraded in 2004 from the now-defunct Latrina's Lounge on Freret. When Hymel's uncle Ezell Hines founded the Uptown Swingers, Hymel says, Freret was at a low point. The second-line, the picnics — all of that was intended to revitalize the neighborhood, in very similar ways to The New Freret today.

The closure of Latrina's was a blow to the Uptown Swingers, but the organization regrouped and marched from Dennis Barber Shop after the storm. Freret Street business owners complained about post-parade trash on the corridor, however, so the Uptown Swingers moved its starting place again — to Hymel's mother's house on Loyola Avenue — and now merely crosses Freret Street, rather than parading on it.

The controversial security-district proposal was quickly shelved after the March meeting. Instead, the New Freret business and property owners' association is creating a campaign to install ProjectNOLA security cameras in homes near drug-dealing hotspots around the neighborhood — a solution that many of the longtime residents have requested. It's a "happy medium," Norwood says, that will focus on actual criminals.

Ensslen notes that the few major crimes in Freret in recent years — the murder of Errol Meeks in front of the former Friar Tucks bar in early 2011, or the shooting of a Dat Dog employee in late 2012 — were solved largely because of security cameras on the corridor. And another case — an armed robbery in the neighborhood one morning shortly after the Friar Tucks killing — led to the arrest of a suspect on the scene, because "there were four different people walking their dogs who could say, 'I saw him go that way," Ensslen says. "It's a neighborhood where we've got people out in the street again."

The economic pressure on residents is not being ignored. The Freret Neighborhood Center has an anti-blight campaign that pairs putting pressure on delinquent properties with offers of assistance to homeowners struggling to return. While some buyers attempt to use code-enforcement actions and other bureaucratic threats to pressure longtime residents, Norwood says the neighborhood center's more compassionate approach represents a good first step.

But if economic issues are the next challenge, Amacker says, neighborhood leaders are getting ready.

"We prepared everybody for the first stage," Amacker says. "Now we've got to prepare them for the long run."

— This story was produced in partnership with the news website Uptown Messenger. To read more about the Freret neighborhood, visit www.uptownmessenger.com.