



Greater New Orleans

Construction begins on Gentilly Walmart after long effort to revive Katrina-flooded shopping center



Demolition has started on the Gentilly Woods Shopping Center on Chef Menteur Highway and Press Street in New Orleans, where Walmart will build a Supercenter. Sept. 10, 2013. *(Mark Waller, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)*



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Construction has begun on a long-in-the-works Walmart Supercenter on the site of the Gentilly Woods shopping center. Demolition of the shopping center, which sat vacant since Hurricane Katrina, began last month. The new store could open in August 2014.

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority bought the property from Thor Equities and Green Tree Realty LLC of New York in 2009. It reached a deal to sell the property to Walmart in 2012.

The process included rounds of price negotiations, competing bids, proposals that failed to gain traction, neighborhood opposition to the idea of a Walmart and then neighborhood acceptance as blight on the property persisted for years. The plan wound through the city's review process until finally winning approval from the New Orleans City Council in February.

Walmart officials said on Tuesday that construction on the 112,000-square-foot store on Chef Menteur Highway at Press Drive is expected to cost about \$14 million. The store will employ about 300 people.



City, state, company and neighborhood officials gather to celebrate the start of construction of a Walmart Supercenter on the site of the long-vacant Gentilly Woods shopping center, at Chef Menteur Highway and Press Street, on Sept. 10, 2013. Mark Waller, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

At a ceremony marking the launch of construction, city and company officials and neighborhood residents talked about the drawn-out path toward returning the Katrina-flooded Gentilly shopping center to commerce.

"This has always been the foundation for our coming back since we started on this almost seven years ago," said Cythnia Hedge-Morrell, the councilwoman whose district includes the

property. "We never gave up. We were persistent."

"We are back," Hedge-Morrell said about the neighborhood's recovery. "We are back solid, and we are better than before."

"The other thing I'm excited about," she said, "is I'm watching this old relic get torn down."

Her son, state Sen. J.P. Morrell, described the process of trying to free the property from an "absentee landlord" after Katrina and finding a developer. He praised NORA for its unusual move of intervening by buying the property. He praised Walmart for its tenacity in pursuing the project even after earlier rejection.

Tice White, a spokesman for Walmart and John Mims, a market manager for the immense retail firm, said the project appealed to the company because the location is under-served.



White said the store could function as a catalyst for more commercial development nearby. And he said the store comes with a branch of the company's charitable foundation that supports neighborhood groups.

Victor A. Gordon, president of the Pontilly Neighborhood Association, praised the development, celebrated the successful conclusion of a long struggle with the property and thanked city and NORA officials.

Walmart also is building a new Supercenter on Bullard Avenue in New Orleans East, which White and Mims said would employ another 300 people and could open in the spring or summer of 2014.

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu on Tuesday hailed the Gentilly store as the latest example of a hard-fought recovery from Katrina and rising economic prospects for New Orleans.

"When companies like Walmart bet on us," he said, "not only will they do better. We'll do better."