

It's no surprise Jennifer Ruley gets around New Orleans on a bicycle. Promoting healthy lifestyles and more livable communities is a part of her job, but it's also a passion. That's why she bought a house near Lake Pontchartrain and its many bike trails. Ruley lost her home to Hurricane Katrina, a fact that lends a personal perspective to her goals for the city.

Growing up in New Orleans and Dallas, the environmental engineer and urban planning specialist viewed cycling as recreation. While working for an international environmental planning and engineering firm in Baton Rouge, Ruley, 37, became intrigued by the intersection of transportation and the physical, social, economic and environmental culture.

When a job planning healthier communities opened up in New Orleans three years ago, she jumped at the chance. Through the Louisiana Public Health Initiative (LPHI), Ruley coordinates Steps to a Healthier New Orleans, part of the nationwide Steps to a Healthier U.S. program. A goal of the local Steps program is to reduce the incidence of obesity, diabetes and asthma in New Orleans through healthier living. Her office is in the city's Department of Public Works, where she is able to serve as a liaison among public, private and community organizations.

One of her responsibilities is the Lafitte Corridor project, a three-mile trail and park network that will connect multiple ethnically diverse neighborhoods. The grassroots group Friends of the Lafitte Corridor (FOLC) is working to create this path along a derelict rail line in the heart of New Orleans.



RICK OLIVIER

Jennifer Ruley: Making New Orleans Better

By Julie Bourbon

Planners have been looking at the Lafitte Corridor since the 1970s with an eye toward turning it into a linear park. It was mentioned in the city's 1999 land use plan and again in the 2004 transportation plan. Why the delay?

There has never been a concerted effort to get from planning to implementation. And there are other issues. Who owns the property? Are the neighbors accepting of an urban trail and park space? A private developer tried to acquire a portion of the land in fall 2005, propelling a group of concerned citizens to form FOLC. They are committed to making the city balance its needs for economic development with the needs of

the community. FOLC currently is working with the City Planning Commission to lead a grassroots community-driven visioning and planning effort. The group also is working with the city of New Orleans to identify and pursue funding sources for creation of the Lafitte Corridor Greenway.

You arrived at LPHI in 2004, the year the transportation plan proposed more than 160 miles of bike routes. What was the state of the bicycle network in New Orleans?

There were about six miles of designated bicycle facilities—paths, shared roadways. That's pretty much it. Fall 2004 was the first time a citywide bicycle network was ever

considered as a ballot issue. New Orleans citizens voted to dedicate \$4 million to develop city bikeways and pedestrian corridors over five years. That money will pay for half of phase one, about 30 miles.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, the landscape—political and otherwise—changed. Has that made it harder to implement projects like the Lafitte Corridor?

The biggest challenge is keeping the focus on implementing the projects we have funding for—roadshare, bicycle lanes, shared use paths, urban trails. With all the focus on recovery, it's easy for those projects to get lost in the shuffle. So it's important

that we move ahead and remind the federal and state government that those projects are still necessary. If we can get those projects on the ground, it will make it easier to make the community realize they are valuable.

Does the layout of New Orleans make it more or less bicycle friendly than other cities?

New Orleans was designed before everyone owned a car, and you can really tell the difference between the pre-World War II and post-World War II neighborhoods, especially in the suburbs. The city is well laid out—the streets are well connected,

There seems to be a growing political will that's reflective of the public will to be a healthier city. But bicycle and pedestrian projects often get dismissed as not being critical to the recovery efforts. They're considered more quality of life and recreational, not critical. Post-Katrina, we're realizing what we value in our community. Whatever makes us healthier is critical to the recovery.

What have been your biggest successes?

We worked with the city and the Downtown Development District to inte-

it's easy to get where you need to go, the neighborhoods are dense—unlike the more sprawling neighboring parishes. It's a place that's designed to be appreciated at a slower pace, one that provides opportunities for people who don't have cars.

How would you rate New Orleans in terms of being a safe and friendly biking and walking environment?

I consider New Orleans a bikeable and walkable community, but not necessarily bike- or walker-friendly. It is easy to get around, but many of the streets and sidewalks need maintenance. And there are problems with motorist aggression and a lack of accommodation of bikers and pedestrians. We're working with the Regional Planning Commission, which has a grant from the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission to address the issues surrounding the rules of the road.

Since Katrina, do you see a new desire to make New Orleans a healthier city?

grate 90 bike racks into the Canal Street Improvement Program [Canal Street is the main downtown corridor]. Before there were none. And we have funding to add 288 bike racks in the Central Business District, the Warehouse District and the Medical District.

What do you see as the future for walkers and bikers in New Orleans?

Post-Katrina New Orleans is ripe for the kind of work we've been doing, making communities more livable, more healthy, more transportation-friendly. Next year will be a real watershed year. With implementation of the master plan, we can be in league with the most bike-friendly communities in the nation. In 2008, this city is going to have so many bicycle and pedestrian projects, a visitor could go in any direction and find one.

Julie Bourbon is the editor of *National Jesuit News* and a freelance writer based in Arlington, Va.