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Voice of the Greater New Orleans Green Party

A Symphonic Arrangement of Trees, Earth, and Water

by Katrin Redfern

Audubon Park, that oasis of peace and greenery in "the most park-starved area in the city," (Times-Picayune June 16th, 1975) is currently under threat by the Audubon Nature Institute (A.N.I.). The park as we know it today is the result of a design begun over a century ago by John Charles Olmsted, stepson and successor of Frederick Law Olmsted, the celebrated creator of Central Park in New York and Yosemite National Park in California. Historians consider him to be the greatest landscape architect in American history. Olmsted believed that city dwellers need a refuge from the pressures of the man-made world; with this principle in mind, he designed Audubon Park to emulate a natural and distinctly Louisiana-like setting.

One of the park's most charming features, the long, winding lagoon with its arching footbridge, was designed to represent a Louisiana bayou. The large open field that runs alongside it was meant to echo a country meadow. The jogging path that today trails gracefully around the park was designed to give New Orleanians a place to promenade publicly, while quieter paths, such as the Hurst Walk, were created to give parkgoers more seclusion and the effect of walking on a country lane. The tranquil grove of oak trees located in the heart of the park was meant to

simulate a small woodland, a place of quiet and privacy.

Both the Hurst walk and the oak grove are now threatened by the Audubon Nature Institute's plans to build a 13,000 square foot clubhouse and restaurant (although zoning laws strictly prohibit restaurants in the park) and golf cart storage facilities within this secluded area. John Charles Olmsted was profoundly opposed to large structures being built in Audubon Park. Olmsted thought such structures "utterly inappropriate and often ruinous" and warned that they were "not germane to the true purpose of Audubon Park." Instead, they would "become so large and conspicuous as to unwarrantably injure the landscape of the park." Oversized buildings were, in Olmsted's mind, "a shocking waste and extravagance."

The A.N.I. also plans to add 50-100 new parking spaces adjacent to the current lot on what was once the Meditation Walk, all without the consent of the public, using taxpayer's money. The new facilities are expected to attract up to 37,000 additional vehicles to the park each year, most of them for tourists and conventioners to whom the new golf course will be marketed. The A.N.I. admits a traffic guard will be needed on weekends to negotiate the

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traffic where the road crosses the jogging path. Additionally, the A.N.I. plans to demolish the Conservatory, a greenhouse that was given as a gift to the people of New Orleans, which they have deliberately let fall into ruin in the fashion of slumlords who purposefully neglect their properties until they warrant being torn down.

Audubon Park is one of New Orleans' most unique treasures. The noted Olmsted scholar Charles Beveridge has called Audubon Park "a symphonic arrangement of trees, earth, and water." The beauty that we have enjoyed there until today is the result of careful planning a century ago. To allow the Audubon Institute to deliberately ignore Olmsted's master plan and willfully eradicate key components of his design in order to appeal to special interests is a tragic error.

The Audubon Institute must honor their commitment to the people of New Orleans and suspend all work on this project until a master plan for its undertaking has been made completely public and submitted for professional review by the City Planning Commission. In addition, Ron Forman, CEO of the A.N.I., is also found to be CEO of the Audubon Park Commission, a clear conflict of interest and a violation of the City Charter. It follows that carrying out this project under his direction is illegal.

For more information, go to
www.saveaudubonpark.org