

Politicians got game, not history

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By Lolis Eric Elie

Staff writer/The Times-Picayune

The area around the 400 block of South Rampart Street is home mostly to parking lots, abandoned buildings and forgotten history. Who among us remembers when Louis Armstrong, covered in flour, performed in white face in a talent show at the Iroquois Theater?

Who among us remembers that 235-243 S. Rampart St. was the Astoria Hotel before it was demolished, and that Armstrong stayed there when he visited the city in 1931? And what about the South Rampart Street clubs where Papa Celestin and Buddy Bolden played?

Jerome Johnson, 56, is too young to have heard the performances, but he treasures this history as if it were the final haul from a spent gold mine.

He wants to return this area to its former glory by renovating the few remaining buildings and erecting new ones in the old architectural style.

"We all know that Bourbon Street is the goose that lays the golden eggs," he said. "But a lot of times, on Bourbon Street you find everything but jazz. This would be more family-oriented."

He has acquired lease-purchase agreements on three buildings in the 400 block of South Rampart Street, the sites of the Eagle Saloon, the Iroquois Theater and the old Karnofsky tailor shop, later Morris Music.

Quite unusual

Johnson is an unusual man.

He goes by an unusual nickname that he spells in an unusual way, PopAgee (pronounced Papa Gee).

Although most of us would raise money for a project early in the process, Johnson refuses to let lack of funds discourage him. "It's very difficult in a capitalist society to open a business when you're undercapitalized," he said. "It's a strange thing about money. A lot of people say, 'If I had money, I would do this.' They let that stop them.

"A project like this, they would have come there with 2 or 3 million. I'm coming in with life savings and pennies."

Getting the job done

Johnson is heartened by the way the politicians raised money for sports teams at a special session of the state Legislature.

"I can't help thinking of how our leaders did what they needed to do to get the Hornets here, and that's good for the economy," he said. "But I think culture and history are more important for the people.

"If they can find the money for the Saints and Hornets, I would like to see them step up and find money for this."

Johnson got a \$200,000 Community Development Block grant from the city.

I can't help but compare this figure to the millions of dollars the city and state have put up for the sports teams. After making this comparison, something about our political leaders became clear to me. When they say they care about our history and culture, they are not to be taken too seriously.

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A ribbon-cutting and kick-off celebration featuring food and live music at the old Eagle Saloon, 401-403 S. Rampart St., will be held Sunday at 4 p.m. For information, call (504) 410-2363.

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