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St. Roch Ave. trees treated for termites

Local group donates neighborhood service

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By Lynne Jensen
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Stretching about a half-mile from the old marketplace on St. Claude Avenue to one of the city's most revered cemeteries, a historic section of St. Roch Avenue is slated for major revitalization post-Katrina. An effort to save the charm of its wide neutral ground came last week when 50 large live oaks were treated for Formosan termites -- for free.

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"It's a magical place," said nearby resident Jule Lang, who recently called a local pest control company to get a price for treating the trees. The cost would have been several thousand dollars, said pest controller Gary Wehlen. He's one of 56 members of the Greater New Orleans Pest Control Association, which offered to do the work at no charge.

Each year, the group partners with a different community organization to provide free pest-control service, Wehlen said. This year, it chose St. Roch Avenue.

"This is a boulevard not unlike St. Charles Avenue, with its magnificent oak trees," Lang said. "And it's surrounded by a really wonderful housing stock. . . . We want to pull people here from the Marigny, Bywater and Gentilly. We've got to move forward."

Lang and her son Drew, an architect who grew up in New Orleans and lives in New York, are part of the Faubourg St. Roch project, a group of about 20 business and nonprofit partners.

Project plans include helping to repair and renovate the St. Roch Market, which Lang said belongs to the city, a neighborhood park and the neutral ground.

Along with saving the neutral ground's oaks, plans call for a 12-foot-wide mosaic pathway down the center "that talks of the amazing history of this street," Lang said.

The project also plans to build two new "passive environmental" structures on St. Roch Avenue and to promote home ownership for low-income residents in the area.

"Of course we'd like to fix all of New Orleans," Lang said. "We picked this six-block stretch because it was doable. . . . We hope this will be a model for other people to do the same thing."

Iley Coleman, president of Greater New Orleans Pest Control Association, has lived in the St. Roch neighborhood since 1971.

"This neighborhood is very, very unique," Coleman said. "You have all cultures in this neighborhood, and it's very diverse."

Wehlen, who owns one of about 25 "mom-and-pop" companies belonging to the association that volunteered to treat the trees, said he grew up in Mid-City, "but I dated a lot of girls in this neighborhood" and from Chalmette, he said, standing on the neutral ground near the St. Roch Market.

One of Wehlen's favorite memories of being teenager was bringing a date home late and blaming it on a train blocking St. Claude Avenue.

"We loved that train track," he said.