



Department of Justice

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JUSTICE DEPARTMENT CHARGES ST. BERNARD PARISH, LOUISIANA, FOR LIMITED RENTAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICANS

WASHINGTON – The Department of Justice today filed a lawsuit against St. Bernard Parish, La., alleging that the parish violated the Fair Housing Act by engaging in a multi-year campaign to limit rental housing opportunities for African-Americans in the parish.

The complaint, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, alleges that the parish violated the Fair Housing Act when it took repeated actions to limit the availability of multi-family and rental housing in the parish. These actions include the establishment of an onerous permit-approval process for single-family rentals, the elimination of multi-family housing in large portions of the parish and repeated attempts to block the development of multi-family affordable-housing. The complaint alleges that the parish’s actions both were intended to and had the effect of disproportionately disadvantaging African-Americans seeking to rent housing in St. Bernard Parish.

The parish has been sued previously over housing and land-use decisions since Hurricane Katrina and found in contempt of court orders repeatedly. In October 2011, a federal district court found that the parish had engaged in intentional discrimination in violation of the Fair Housing Act by “doggedly attempt[ing] to preserve the pre-Katrina demographics of St. Bernard Parish.”

“Every person should have the opportunity to choose where they will live. When a local government puts up discriminatory barriers, as St. Bernard Parish has, it violates the law,” said Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. “We will use our enforcement tools to break down such barriers and ensure that people have housing choice free of discrimination.”

“The Department of Justice is committed to ensuring that everyone in our community – regardless of race, color or national origin – enjoys the equal protection of our Constitution and our laws, as well as the absolute right to live in any community of their choosing without discrimination,” said James Letten, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Louisiana.

“Today’s action exemplifies how HUD and the Justice Department are working together to eradicate housing discrimination,” stated John Trasviña, HUD Assistant Secretary for Fair

Housing and Equal Opportunity. “Our agencies will not allow zoning or other exclusionary means to deny housing because of race.”

The complaint is based in part on referrals from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). From March 2008 to September 2011, 10 residents and homeowners filed complaints with HUD, alleging that the parish’s actions violated the Fair Housing Act. HUD referred these complaints to the Department of Justice in accordance with a provision in the Fair Housing Act that authorizes the department to enforce allegations of discriminatory zoning or land use practices by a local government.

Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, John Trasviña, also filed a complaint on behalf of the HUD Secretary alleging that the parish violated the Fair Housing Act by passing an ordinance that restricted new multifamily housing construction to certain areas of the city and prohibited it in others. HUD referred this complaint to the Department of Justice on Jan. 20, 2012.

The department’s lawsuit seeks a court order that would enjoin the parish from making unavailable or denying housing on the basis of race and requires it to take actions to prevent any similar discriminatory conduct in the future. The lawsuit also seeks monetary damages for persons harmed by the parish’s actions and a civil penalty.

The federal Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in housing based on race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability and familial status. Fair housing enforcement is a priority of the Civil Rights Division. More information about the Civil Rights Division and the laws it enforces is available at www.justice.gov/crt. Individuals who believe that they may have been victims of housing discrimination can call the Housing Discrimination Tip Line at 1-800-896-7743, email the Justice Department at fairhousing@usdoj.gov, or contact HUD at 1-800-669-9777.

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