

METRO NEWS

Amphitheater plan OK'd by panel

By **COLEMAN WARNER**
Staff writer

Racing toward an Aug. 14 opening gala during the Republican National Convention, developers of a proposed 7,100-seat amphitheater on the Erato Street Wharf gained the City Planning Commission's blessing for the project Tuesday.

Although design plans are far from complete, the commission voted 6-1 to advise the New Orleans City Council to allow the project, patterned after a popular amphitheater built for the 1984 world's fair.

The approval followed a report by promoter Barry Mendelson, the project director, who said the amphitheater would "bring continuous entertainment back to the riverfront," especially during the summer, when tourism dips.

"We have a mandate to make this place a first-class place, and it will be," Mendelson said. He promised a festive design and top shows.

Three weeks ago Mendelson said the amphitheater would be on the Julia Street Wharf, but a city report now says his company, Barry Mendelson Presents Inc., has moved the site just upriver to the Erato wharf.

The report by city planners cautioned that the amphitheater "is not the highest and best use" of the riverfront site, which may eventually be used for a complex of shops, offices and convention facilities.

Also, parking remains a problem, with site plans featuring only a small parking area for dignitaries.

Developers have said they are working with a parking garage on Fulton Street to provide some parking and that a planned river-

front trolley should help ensure public access. Also, they said a shuttle bus may be provided.

Despite the planning snags, the planning report said the arena would add "people, color and activity" to the riverfront and would generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxes for the city, as well as employing up to 50 people during each event.

The commission said the council should include several requirements in its approval of the project, including:

► A statement that the amphitheater is an interim use, and may be removed later to allow for construction of other buildings. The Dock Board, which owns the wharf, should write the shortest possible lease for the land.

► The project must provide a detailed plan for parking, shuttle bus operations, rail crossings and pedestrian access. Complete site plans must gain the city planning director's approval before city permits are issued.

► The amphitheater would be reviewed in January 1989 to determine how well it mixes with nearby land uses and its operating reputation. After five years it would face another Planning Commission review and again would have to gain council approval.

The project faces a tight schedule in gaining city approval and completing construction by the opening of the Republican convention, officials said. Mendelson has said construction will take about 2½ months.

In other action, the commission asked the council to approve

plans by the Fair Grounds for a parlor for horse race betting, following steps by the racetrack to soften the parlor's impact on the surrounding neighborhood. The off-track betting parlor, scheduled to open May 6, would be the city's first.

Leaders of the Faubourg St. John Neighborhood Association say they are pleased with the Fair Grounds' agreement to reduce night outdoor lighting, provide free on-site parking and take other steps to avoid disrupting nearby residents.

Also Tuesday, the commission delayed action on a request by

developers of the Jackson Brewery retail complex for a lifting of rules that dictate when the development must be completed. A four-phase schedule for use of the riverfront property was set in 1983 when Jackson Square Investment Ltd. bought the French Quarter property from the city.

Complex developer Darryl Berger and city planners have differed over how much landscaping the site should have in return for removal of the deadlines. Berger requested Tuesday's delay to allow him to discuss a new site plan with city officials.

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Hookups will cost \$100 more

Apartment dwellers and tenants in trailer parks will have to pay LP&L an extra \$100 for an electrical hookup, a company spokesman said Tuesday.

Mike Sanders said LP&L on Monday raised the deposit for hookups from \$50 to \$150 for those customers. NOPS did not raise its deposit fee, he said.

Sanders said LP&L increased its deposit only for this group because 90 percent of the utility's uncollectible bills belong to tenants of apartments and trailer parks. Last year, uncollectible bills amounted to \$4.4 million, Sanders said.

"We're getting in line with other utilities. This way, the other customers don't have to pick up the tab," Sanders said.

Sanders said that when tenants leave outstanding bills, the utility must ask regulators for permission to charge remaining customers for the shortfall.

Tenants who pay their bills will receive the \$150 back when they move, Sanders said.

LP&L pays interest on all deposits.

Toxic spill cleaned up on riverfront

A small spill of a highly toxic chemical on the riverfront Tuesday afternoon was cleared without damage or injuries, a Fire Department official said.

The quantity of nitro benzene that was exposed about 12:20 p.m. at the Evans Cooperaage Co. facility on the Louisiana Avenue Wharf was very small, Deputy Fire Chief William Miller said. There was no danger to area residents.

The chemical spill was cleaned up by personnel in special chemical-proof attire and the area affected was scrubbed down.

The chemical, a Class B toxic, is a highly poisonous substance that can be fatal if inhaled or ingested orally or absorbed through the skin, Miller said.

State Police are investigating to determine if any shipping violations were involved, Miller said.

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