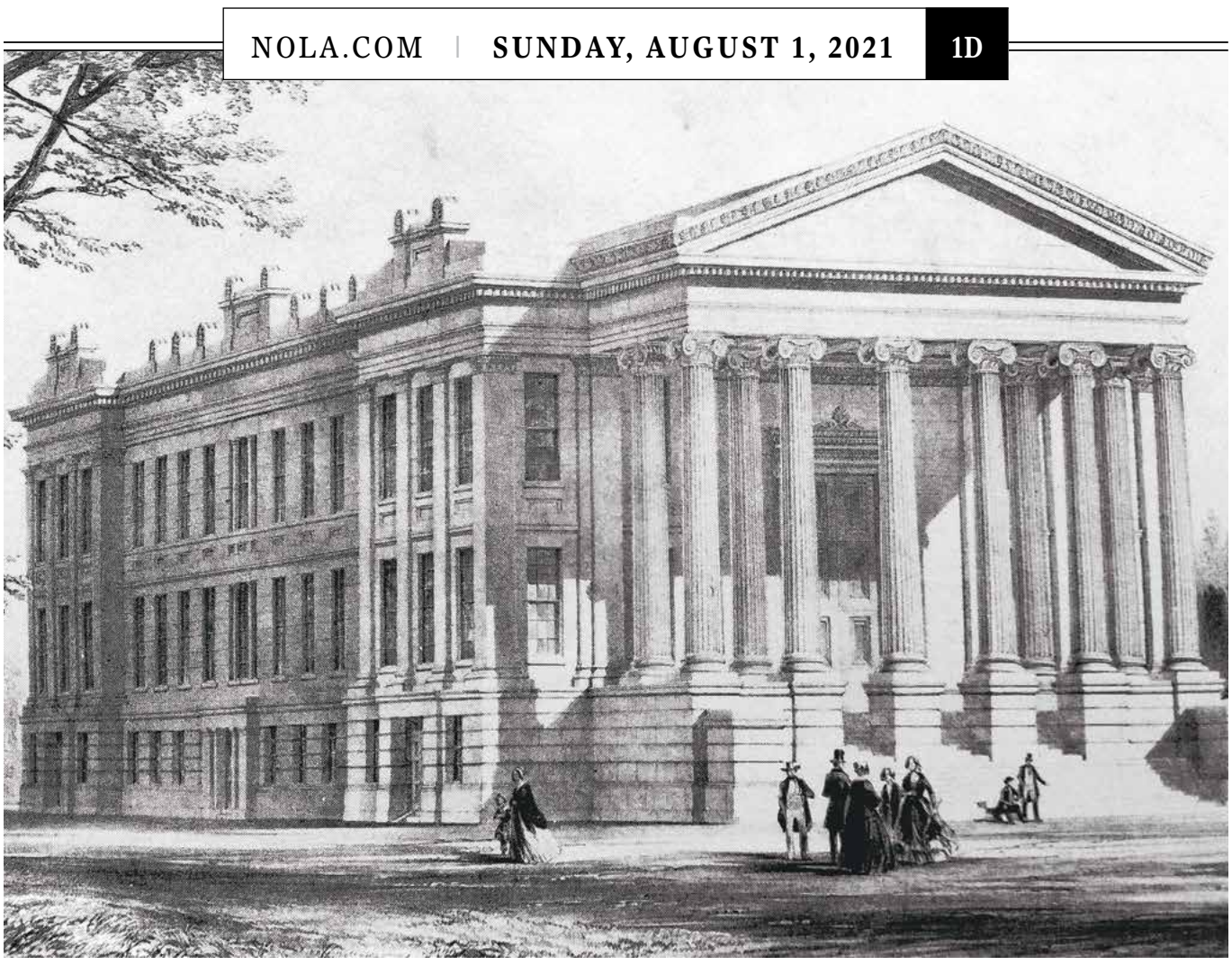

IMAGE FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
Municipal Hall, designed in 1845 by James Gallier originally for the First Municipality, became City Hall in 1853.

Danny Heitman
AT RANDOM

In times of trouble, local heroes offer hope

When our family traveled to the Gulf Coast for a few days last summer, a copy of Thomas Lynch's "The Depositions" went along for the ride.

You might say that "The Depositions" was my beach book for the season, though I rarely read much on the beach itself. The waves and sky get most of my attention, and I figure it's a waste to come all that way to the shore to spend my afternoon with a book.

What reading I do near the beach usually happens in a rented condo as I shake the last sand from my toes and curl up on a couch not my own. That's how I first got to know "The Depositions," Lynch's collection of essays about his life running a funeral home in Michigan.

Books about the mortician trade might not seem like the most cheerful summer reading, and "The Depositions" made an especially odd choice last year as a pandemic claimed so many lives.

But as I mentioned in an earlier column, Lynch's reflections aren't really about death. They're more about how his daily closeness to bereavement underlines the wonder of life itself. Lynch "takes pains to point out that his experience hasn't made him more insightful than anyone else about the shadow of mortality," I wrote back then. "But what abides in 'The Depositions' is Lynch's keen eye for the seemingly small daily gifts that more of us have been noticing in this troubled year."

All of this has come to mind because Lynch is back on my reading list this summer — this time, for his new collection of poems, "Bone Rosary."

The title of the book was inspired by the soup bones that Lynch's old dog leaves behind, littering "the lawn like hard SpaghettiO's by the time I shuffled around to pick them up, lest they be run over by a power mower and shot through a window or take out some unsuspecting human."

Lynch isn't a warm and fuzzy writer — some of his poems have a wicked edge — but he's alert to the little things that reveal the miracle of being alive. As he puts it, he believes "in the life of language and its power to make us known to one another and to ourselves."

That ideal seems most fully realized in "Local Heroes," a poem written some years ago that, in the wake of recent news events, couldn't be more timely. It's about the people who provide rescue, comfort and condolences when disasters strike. Those of us who live in Louisiana know deeply what kind of solace such local heroes can bring.

"The daylong news is dire," Lynch writes, "full of true believers and politicos … But here, brave men and women pick the pieces up."

It's a powerful reminder that in another challenging year, the real heroes might be just down your street.

Email Danny Heitman at danny@dannyheitman.com.

Richard Campanella's
GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

NO THANKS

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

City Hall is no longer the prize it once was, when communities vied to be close to political power

For the third time in as many administrations, citizen-led resistance has led to the withdrawal of a mayoral proposal to relocate New Orleans City Hall.

The most recent episode entailed advocates fighting Mayor LaToya Cantrell's plan to put City Hall in the Municipal Auditorium, by Congo Square and Armstrong Park in the Faubourg Treme.

Eight years earlier, Mayor Mitch Landrieu proposed moving the seat of local government to another empty public building, the former Charity Hospital on Tulane Avenue.

Four years before that, in 2009, Mayor Ray Nagin proposed putting City Hall in the former Chevron Building at 935 Gravier Street.

The pros and cons of all three moves were widely discussed, and their fates are a matter of public record.

What has gone less noticed is the broader shift of citizens' perception of City Hall as a neighbor. New Orleanians once fought to get iconic government buildings like City Hall located in their neighborhood. Now, the most passionate voices fight to get them out.

STAFF FILE PHOTO BY JOHN STANTON
Protesters gathered June 17 at Armstrong Park to oppose the relocation of City Hall to Municipal Auditorium.

Amenities and nuisances

In analyzing cities and their dynamics, geographers and urban sociologists speak of "amenities" and "nuisances."

An amenity is something that enhances the livability, desirability or economic value of a neighborhood, such as parks, trees, beautiful buildings, recreational assets or scenic attractions.

A nuisance is the opposite — something perceived to diminish value, such as a highway, railroad, industries, transmission towers or landfills.

There's a fair amount of subjectivity between the two. One person's amenity might be another's nuisance, such as when a new park is viewed as a catalyst for gentrification, or a recreational facility is feared by those who think it might become noisy and congested.

Likewise, a nuisance to one resident might be viewed as a vital economic benefit to

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STAFF FILE PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER
Cars drive around a giant handmade caution cone in the middle of a pothole at the intersection of Washington Avenue and Constance Street in New Orleans on March 24.

It has a point

Giant traffic cone 'runs for mayor' in gag political campaign

Doug MacCash

It's just a joke, of course. Anonymous smart alecks have taken to social media to announce that an 8-foot-tall traffic cone plans to run for mayor of New Orleans in the upcoming election. The faux campaign combines the Crescent City's insatiable craving for comedy with the population's simmering frustration with seemingly eternal potholes and equally endless street construction.

It's a gag built on another gag. Back in early April, pranksters planted a giant homemade traffic cone atop a teeth-jarring dip in Washington Avenue. King Cone, as it was dubbed, tickled the funny bone of every pothole dodger, becoming a magnet for selfies and a local pop icon.

When the large, orange cone disappeared on Easter weekend, some onlookers assumed it had been stolen, while others sardonically suggested religious implications. A small white traffic cone augmented with a halo and angel wings appeared at the site, symbolizing the giant cone's presumed "ascension."

To absolutely nobody's surprise, a Carnival-style marching

➤ See **CONE,** page **2D**

CITY HALL

Continued from page 1D

another, such as a highway exit, metro stop or industrial plant.

City Hall as an amenity

For centuries, New Orleanians wanted to have the seat of government in their backyard, viewing it as an amenity and a source of pride.

The tipping point in the city's tenuous early years, for example, came with the 1721 decision to relocate the Louisiana colony's capital and company headquarters from Biloxi to New Orleans.

Plenty of challenges lay ahead, but the move generated optimism and momentum. "The year 1721 had been generally favourable to New Orleans," wrote French historian Marc de Villiers du Terrage, and with its new status, the struggling outpost became "a small town, and the number of its irreconcilable enemies began to decrease."

By the mid-1800s, that town had become a major American city. French-speaking Creoles battled English-speaking Americans for political power and cultural sway, and one way to win both was to get local government in their backyard.

For Creoles, that meant the French Quarter, where City Hall had long been located. For Anglophones, it meant the "American sector," today's Central Business District.

Political geography became so disputatious that, in 1836, the city split into three semi-autonomous municipalities. Each section took pride in its own Municipality Hall, which kept power and prestige close to home.

When the city reunified in 1852, Creoles were disheartened to see City Hall get relocated out of the aging Cabildo at Jackson Square to a majestic new structure, today's Gallier Hall, on Lafayette Square.

The relocation symbolized the ongoing loss of Creole power in the face of the city's gradual Americanization and upriver expansion.

State Capitol as amenity

The view of public buildings as amenities persisted later in the 1800s.

When two real estate speculators wanted to develop an open tract in Uptown in 1871, they knew building amenities would help their cause. According to researcher Hilary Somerville Irvin, they "lobbied the state legislature to acquire the site for a public park on the river side of St. Charles Avenue, and for a new state capitol on the lake side."

The seat of state government had been in flux since the Civil War. Building a stately new capitol in Uptown would raise property values, and state legislators were promised parcels along the avenue to encourage their support.

The scheme soon became a scandal, and the capitol eventually returned to Baton Rouge. But in doing so, it left behind open space for two future amenities — the campuses of Tulane and Loyola universities.

As for that other amenity, it became Audubon Park, which together with the campuses has helped make Audubon/University among the city's wealthiest neighborhoods.

Federal buildings as amenities

A rivalry of the early 1900s further illustrates how neighbors once vied for prominent government buildings.

In 1899, city boosters petitioned to get a federal post office built in New Orleans. Around the same time, state officials called for a new courthouse to replace the century-old Cabildo on Jackson Square, formerly City Hall and now deemed inadequate.

What ensued was a spirited competition between the 2nd District, meaning the French Quarter, and the 1st District, now the Central Business District.

Advocates for both areas wanted these amenities on their side of Canal Street, and marshaled arguments that they felt were fair and reasoned.

One 1st District advocate thought the post office ought to be next to all the newspaper offices on Camp Street. Another noted that "the growth of the city is upstream, and not towards the cemeteries," and held that "all the big public buildings (should be) grouped around a park," namely "Lafayette Square, having the City Hall there already."

Still another warned against any attempt to turn a nuisance into an amenity, saying, "We do not want a Post-Office in the rear of the city, surrounded by houses of prostitution … There will be no Mardi-Gras business with Uncle Sam's money."

Merchants in the 2nd District, meanwhile, argued their lower property values would ease acquisition costs, while reinvestment would reverse downtown decline. Why not site both buildings adjacently, they proposed, perhaps at 800-900 Customhouse (now Iberville), or 200-300 Bourbon?

One prominent Canal Street clothier placed a front-page ad in The Picayune, preemptively declaring "Hurrah for Downtown. Downtown is Taking the Lead. Downtown Will Have the New Postoffice. Downtown Will Have the New Court House."

What resulted was a compromise — one amenity per neighborhood.

The state in 1903 selected the 2nd District for its courthouse. Demolitions of old Creole town houses ensued, and in 1910, the Louisiana State Supreme Court moved into its gigantic new Beaux Arts building at 400 Royal Street, where it convenes today.

As for the post office, federal officials selected a parcel in the 1st District, on Lafayette Square directly across from City Hall. They purchased the land in 1904, had it cleared by 1907, and in 1915 completed an Italian Renaissance behemoth for the post office and other federal offices. It now houses the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals.

STAFF FILE PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Mayor Mitch Landrieu proposed moving the seat of local government to the former Charity Hospital complex.

Current City Hall

What we don't necessarily hear in the historical record is the voices of those folks who might have suffered the deprivations of such relocations — the ones who got expropriated, who viewed the targeted "nuisance" as their beloved home, or who endured more costs than benefits from the supposed amenity.

That was probably the case for residents of the mostly African American 3rd Ward neighborhood who got displaced for the next relocation of City Hall, in the 1950s.

That was an era when "slum clearance" and "urban renewal" were nationwide trends, and when planners aimed to centralize government functions into sprawling civic and cultural complexes.

New Orleans' new City Hall opened in 1957, followed by a new library, offices and courts, all in gleaming Modernist designs.

The opening of the Civic Center presaged a building boom on Loyola Avenue, and a decline of the Lafayette Square area which had just lost City Hall. The dynamic seemed to evidence the long-held sense that City Hall was an amenity.

New perspectives

What changed to make a project like City Hall no longer the neighborhood prize it once was?

In part, it's due to new sensitivities on the impacts of such projects of the past, giving voice to the disenfranchised who were expropriated, displaced or otherwise harmed by society's power brokers.

Relatedly, it comes from a new appreciation for places once shrugged off, but now venerated, whereas City Hall, once venerated, is now often shrugged off. One prominent critic of the move to the Municipal Auditorium went so far to say that City Hall would "desecrate" Louis Armstrong Park and Congo Square.

To others, the resistance is symptomatic of a broader American disdain of government, or of a polemical strain in civic discourse amplified by social media.

But to hear the resistors themselves tell it, they have rationality, facts and fairness on their side in keeping City Hall out of their neighborhood — which is just how proponents felt in times past, when they argued to do the exact opposite.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "The West Bank of Greater New Orleans," "Cityscapes of New Orleans," "Bourbon Street — A History," and other books. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu, richcampanella.com, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.