But the buses can be an inconvenience, some say.

NEW ORLEANS (AP) -- Some New Orleans residents and city officials are pushing back against tour operators who bus out-of-towners into the city's Lower 9th Ward, where Hurricane Katrina unleashed a wall of water that pushed homes off foundations and stranded residents on rooftops when the levees failed.

About 9 million people visit New Orleans each year, mostly to see its stately homes along oak-lined avenues, dine at its renowned restaurants and take in the jazz and ribaldry of Bourbon Street. But Katrina's devastation in August 2005 unleashed an unexpected cottage tourism industry, drawing a daily parade of rubbernecking tourists for a close-up look at the city's hard-hit Lower 9th Ward.

Worried that a flood of tour buses and vans would interfere with clean-up efforts, the City Council approved an ordinance in 2006 banning them from crossing the prominent Industrial Canal entering the neighborhood that received Katrina's fury. Now, tour operators are crying foul, claiming the ordinance had been thinly enforced until recently.

They say a business that is bringing them and the city tourist dollars is being hurt.

"I can't afford to keep paying tickets," said David Lee Ducote, owner of Southern Style Tours.

As the Lower 9th Ward slowly rebuilds - vacant lots still attest to where homes once stood - visitor interest has also been piqued by housing built by actor Brad Pitt and his Make It Right foundation.

City Councilman Ernest Charbonnet, who represents the neighborhood, says residents complain the tour vehicles are blocking streets and damaging the roads. They also are weary of being gawked at.

Charbonnet said city officials didn't enforce the ordinance unless someone filed a formal complaint, an infrequent occurrence as a daily parade of buses, vans and shuttles packed with camera-wielding tourists trouped by the Pitt houses and the home of rock `n roll star Fats Domino.

That changed in recent weeks when complaints prompted officials to stop and fine operators.

"We're fed up and tired of them coming through the neighborhood like we're some sideshow," said Vanessa Gueringer, a lifelong Lower 9th Ward resident.

"After all the suffering we have been through, we deserve more respect than this," she said. "We don't need those big buses coming through here tearing it up."

Lynn Wolken, a veteran guide who belongs to the Tour Guides Association of Greater New Orleans, said many fellow guides weren't aware of the ordinance or knew it existed but wasn't being enforced.

Yet she said no warning had been issued from the city's Taxicab Bureau, which regulates tour

companies.

"A warning would have been nice," she said.

She noted that about 30 companies ply the neighborhood, charging tourists about $25 apiece.

Charbonnet said he believes there's room for compromise. He plans to gather tour guides and residents together Friday to begin discussing possible changes to the ordinance, proposals such as limiting bus sizes and requiring a single route to protect streets and the privacy of the residents.

"I feel confident that we will come up with a plan that will work for everybody," he said.

For now, many tour companies have halted tours of the neighborhood.

Ducote said his company still takes visitors elsewhere in the rebuilding city, including to the Musicians Village, a post-Katrina effort launched near the Lower 9th Ward by entertainers Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis.

Meanwhile, not all Lower 9th residents oppose the tour buses.

Some, like Sidney Williams, say they enjoy waving to tourists and selling homemade treats such as pralines, a popular New Orleans candy, as the buses wend through the neighborhood.

But the buses can be an inconvenience, some say.

"They just stop in the middle of the street, and you have to go around them," said Jadii Joseph, who lives in one of the Make It Right homes.

Wolken said she doesn't need the Lower 9th to show evidence of 2005 destruction. Tour buses are permitted in other areas bouncing back from Katrina. "But everybody wants to see the Lower 9th Ward," she said. "It's the most popular."

Kelly Schulz, spokeswoman for the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, said the Katrina tours kept the tour companies in business in the storm's aftermath when travel to the city plummeted.

"These tours are important," Schulz said. "People come to New Orleans from all over the world, and they want to see the Lower 9th Ward just like visitors to New York want to see the site of the World Trade Centers. It's human nature. It's curiosity. We certainly need to be respectful and not cause more suffering, but seeing these areas in person brings needed attention."