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*State trails neighbor on Katrina recovery*

*By Bill Minor*

JACKSON — In “Coastal Comeback,” the TV documentary assessing progress three years after Katrina produced jointly by Louisiana and Mississippi public broadcasting, Chuck Benvenuti of Bay St. Louis got it right: Why has more of the \$5.4 billion in recovery grant money Congress gave Mississippi in December 2005 not found its way down to where it’s needed?

“The federal government gave us over \$5 billion in December 2005, and there is a whole bunch of it that still hasn’t hit the streets down here,” Benvenuti, a Bay St. Louis CPA, told a panel of Mississippi authorities assembled in a coastal setting for the two-state documentary.

Ashley Edwards, representing the Haley Barbour administration, contended that the governor’s idea since Katrina was: “we (his office) would get the money ... and the spending of it would be locally driven.”

**But Benvenuti and several other Coastians — as well as recent studies made by the Rockefeller Institute of Government — say it hasn’t happened the way Edwards described, that there’s been a bottleneck somewhere.** “Our perception down here,” Benvenuti told me by telephone, “is that recovery is being handled in Jackson, and they don’t have a clue on what needs to be done. ... They keep pointing the finger at HUD (Housing and Urban Development) and CDBG (Community Development Block Grants).”

**The Rockefeller Institute’s studies compare different approaches by Mississippi and Louisiana in handling relief aid. Mississippi, says the report, has used a “top-down approach with the governor positioned at the top.” Louisiana**

**“added several layers to the planning process and included its Legislature.” Louisiana’s process, according to the Rockefeller report, was to build consensus between state government and the public.**

Louisiana early-on had created the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) with a board of four legislators and 33 volunteers named by the governor. In Mississippi, Barbour refused to have any legislative input and funneled the \$5.4 billion through his tightly controlled Mississippi Development Authority.

**LRA, said the report, developed its “Louisiana Speaks” initiative focusing on 19 hardest-hit parishes to help them develop their own long-term plans. Out of the Louisiana Speaks Regional Plan came a set of detailed strategic implementation plans, some of which the Rockefeller Institute found have been successfully accomplished, though much is still to be done.**

**With great fanfare in October 2005, Barbour established a 36-member Governor’s Renewal Commission and convened the “Mississippi Renewal Forum” that brought in some 100 architects, planners and development experts for a five-day brainstorming session. It produced a report in December 2005, but as pointed by the Rockefeller Institute’s study, the proposals of the Barbour commission were “advisory only” and provided no mandatory framework for local officials and residents to implement recovery.**

So far, only one regional action recommended by Barbour’s commission — creation of a regional utility district to coordinate water, sewer and other utility services in the six southernmost counties — has made any headway, but with only lukewarm

support from the Barbour administration it is still inoperative.

In a three-year Katrina look-back by the Jim Lehrer News Hour on PBS, Editor Jim Amoss of The Times-Picayune said his newspaper had done a detailed assessment of New Orleans' recovery, and also sent a news team to the Mississippi Gulf Coast that came back with a rather dismal report of its recovery. (Amoss' parents still live in Pass Christian.)

"Our reporter came back (from the Coast) and he compared it to a savagely burned patient three years after a lethal fire and scar tissue everywhere," Amoss said, adding: "the Mississippi Gulf Coast still looks like a ravaged area ... and people have not yet rebuilt, with the exception of the casinos in some of the bigger cities."

**The Rockefeller study underscored a big difference in how the two states' handled home-re-**

**building grants — the critical area of post-Katrina housing recovery. Mississippi launched its program with initial homeowner grants up to \$150,000 that went only to those who lived outside the flood zone and had insurance, benefiting mostly affluent homeowners.**

**By contrast, Louisiana's Home Again program encompassed houses both within and outside the flood zone, helping more homeowners of modest means. While Mississippi initially was ahead of Louisiana in the number of homeowner grants, by late 2007 Louisiana housing grants exceeded Mississippi by 3 to 1.**

**Rockefeller shows another big difference: The public accounting of federal aid received and how spent is far more transparent in Louisiana, which posts detailed information on the Internet. Mississippi has no such Web site.**