

# GulfGov Reports:

## The Role of Community Rebuilding Plans in the Hurricane Recovery



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# GulfGov Reports

## The Role of Community Rebuilding Plans in the Hurricane Recovery



**Public Affairs Research  
Council of Louisiana**

**Principal Author:  
Karen Rowley**

***Special Projects Manager,  
Public Affairs Research  
Council of Louisiana***



**The Nelson A. Rockefeller  
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The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government  
411 State Street  
Albany, New York 12203-1003  
[www.rockinst.org](http://www.rockinst.org)

Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana  
4664 Jamestown Avenue, Suite 300  
Baton Rouge, LA 70808-4776  
[www.la-par.org](http://www.la-par.org)

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# Executive Summary

Nearly three years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast region, recovery progress is evident. So are irrevocable change and the reminder that significant problems remain for those communities hit hardest by the storms. Local officials who once talked optimistically of rapid rebuilding and recovery now talk in terms of 10-year time frames. Housing, insurance, and flood elevations top the list of ongoing obstacles to recovery, followed closely by labor shortages, construction costs, and infrastructure repair needs.

Almost every local official cites the endless, complex, repetitive processes needed to gain access to state and federal recovery money and the impact this has had on their ability to push their communities forward. But as local officials waited for the money pipeline to begin to flow, they planned. They held numerous public meetings and brought in countless experts to help them create a vision of what they wanted their communities to look like as they rebuilt. They looked for money to help turn their visions into reality and began to piece together federal, state, local, and private sources of funding. Now, their persistence and their planning appear poised to pay off, with major community recovery and rebuilding projects finally gaining some much-needed momentum.

The sixth installment in the ongoing *GulfGov Reports: Study of the Recovery, Role, and Capacity of the States and Localities Damaged by the 2005 Hurricanes* project, this study examines the regional and community recovery planning efforts undertaken in both Mississippi and Louisiana. It covers some of the areas still working to recover — Cameron Parish, St. Bernard Parish, and New Orleans in Louisiana and Bay St. Louis (Hancock County), Biloxi, and Gulfport (Harrison County) in Mississippi — and some of the areas that are doing well in the wake of the storms — Lake Charles and St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana and Hattiesburg in Mississippi.

In both states, regional planning efforts were complex and multi-layered, and focused on helping officials and residents develop creative visions of what the future could look like. The process also offered residents and local officials an opportunity to come up with new and imaginative ways to address longstanding infrastructure problems.

But planning and doing are two entirely different things, and many people have observed that neither regional plan has brought about significant change ... yet. While the disappointment is understandable, it misses a major point — these are long-term plans designed to effect change over many years. Many of their elements will require ongoing discussion, negotiation, consensus-building, and funding to carry out.

At the local level, the hardest hit communities began the process of rebuilding even before they had recovery plans in place. They determined what was unsalvageable, what could be repaired or rebuilt, and what was functional. Then the big question: How should they rebuild?

In whatever form it took, this question is what the planning process sought to answer. Should communities that were leveled by Katrina or Rita or that sat in floodwaters for weeks simply rebuild what existed before the storms, or should they take advantage of the opportunity to make changes? In the discussions that were at the heart of the planning, other questions were broached and debated: What aspects of the community should be kept? What aspects should change? Where will the money come from? How can a consensus for change be reached among residents?

For other communities affected by the storms, Katrina and Rita presented unexpected opportunities. For some the challenge has been how to meet the demands of accelerated growth; for others, it has been how to make needed changes and improvements given the repairs required in the wake of the storms' damage. The question local officials and residents tried to address in this instance was how should we grow?

The major issues discussed were the same as at the regional level: infrastructure repair and improvement, expansion of economic development opportunities, and redevelopment of neighborhoods and housing. The most specific recommendations in the local plans centered on infrastructure and economic development, even though they all acknowledged the importance of an adequate supply of available, affordable housing. And in all of the communities in this study, officials described a new attitude among residents who were more willing to get involved, who were more interested in planning for a better future, and who were not willing to just return to the old ways.

In addition to examining and assessing the recovery and growth plans of these communities, the study also found some steps that local officials and residents can take that could help them begin the rebuilding process more quickly the next time disaster strikes. Among them:

- 1) A clearly defined disaster response plan should be in place well before a disaster strikes in an effort to shorten the time it takes a community to move into the long-term recovery aspect of a catastrophic event.
- 2) The long-term recovery planning process should be started almost as soon as the immediate danger from the disaster has passed.
- 3) Specific people within state and federal recovery offices should be designated as liaisons for local officials. These liaisons would be the key contacts for local officials as they try to navigate all the paperwork and other bureaucratic requirements necessary to gain access to recovery money.
- 4) Federal recovery funding rules should be revised so that a new category is created to handle large-scale disasters. In addition, the application and disbursement procedures for that new category should be designed so as to allow the government to disburse recovery money as quickly as possible.

Nearly three years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the recovery momentum finally seems to be accelerating. Rebuilding projects are well under way in most of the hardest hit communities, while those areas that have experienced rapid growth have expansion and improvement projects in place. Within 10

years, local officials estimate, most of these projects should be done and the recovery should be nearly complete.

Initially, the rebuilding and growth plans examined in this study provided a way for members of the public to get involved in making decisions about the future of their communities. Now the plans are providing the framework for the direction of the recovery. None of these plans was really necessary for recovery to take place. The communities damaged in the storms have been rebuilding in one way or another since the immediate danger passed. Local officials did not need a plan, for instance, to restore roads, water and sewer service, electricity, and other essential services. But they did need a plan to rebuild their communities in safer, stronger, and smarter ways. Ultimately these recovery and growth plans represent opportunity and something even more powerful in the face of a disaster — hope.

# GulfGov Reports: The Role of Community Rebuilding Plans in the Hurricane Recovery

## INTRODUCTION

Nearly three years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast region, recovery progress is evident. So are irrevocable change and the reminder that significant problems remain for those communities hit hardest by the storms. Local officials who once talked optimistically of rapid rebuilding and recovery now talk in terms of 10-year time frames. Housing, insurance, and flood elevations top of the list of ongoing obstacles to recovery, followed closely by labor shortages, construction costs, and infrastructure repair needs.

Almost every local official cites the endless, complex, repetitive processes needed to gain access to state and federal recovery money and the impact this has had on their ability to push their communities forward. But as local officials waited for the money pipeline to begin to flow, they planned. They held numerous public meetings and brought in countless experts to help them create a vision of what they wanted their communities to look like as they rebuilt. They looked for money to help turn their visions into reality and began to piece together federal, state, local, and private sources of funding.

Now, their persistence and their planning appear poised to pay off, with major community recovery and rebuilding projects finally gaining some much-needed momentum. The plans are there, much of the money is there, and the will is there. To quote the mayor of Gulfport, Mississippi, 2008 should be the “Year of Bricks and Mortar.”

This report is the sixth installment in the ongoing *GulfGov Reports: Study of the Recovery, Role, and Capacity of the States and Localities Damaged by the 2005 Hurricanes* project. It focuses on the status of the recovery in the hardest hit areas, the dramatic changes in some of the less damaged communities, and the impact of rebuilding and growth plans on the future character of these communities. Because the *GulfGov Reports* project’s focus is on the recovery, none of the reports discusses disaster response in any depth.

In August 2006, *GulfGov Reports* released the first of a series of studies examining the impact of hurricanes Katrina and Rita across 22 communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. *GulfGov Reports: One Year Later* focused on five primary topics: the economics of hurricanes, the planning and rebuilding process, the housing and labor shortages, the role of nonprofit organizations, and the state of the states.

It concluded that in the end, hurricanes Katrina and Rita produced two disasters. The first was the immediate crisis created when the hurricanes made landfall. The second was the inability of the various levels of government to work together in response to the crisis. The consequences included a potentially

haphazard rebuilding of the devastated communities, the repetition of mistakes, the exclusion of some segments of the population in the rebuilding efforts, and the loss of a rare opportunity to reshape a region for the better. Nearly three years after the storms, the evidence suggests these concerns remain valid.

In April 2007, *GulfGov Reports* released the second report in the series: *GulfGov Reports: A Year and a Half after Katrina and Rita, an Uneven Recovery*. This report focused on the local governments in the hurricane-affected areas and whether they were helping or hindering the recovery process. In addition, the study looked at how the economies in these communities were faring, the situation with labor and housing, and the state of the states. The one issue that continued to dominate the recovery effort was the lack of available, affordable housing. Also, the demand for labor continued to outstrip supply, in large part because of the lack of housing. Still, 18 months after the hurricanes, there was progress — albeit uneven progress. That progress, in turn, seemed to be dependent on three factors:

- How effective the community's leaders were in making decisions about what direction the recovery would take.
- How badly the community's business and economic infrastructure was damaged by the storms.
- How quickly the community was able to tap into state and federal aid flows.

In October 2007, the project released *GulfGov Reports: Response, Recovery, and the Role of the Nonprofit Community in the Two Years Since Katrina and Rita*. This study examined the role of the nonprofit sector in the recovery, what impact the storms had on the work of these organizations, and what changes they made to handle the challenges of the next disaster. The report found that nonprofit, community-based, and faith-based organizations remained a critical component in the recovery efforts because of their ability to be flexible, adapt their missions, marshal resources, and get around bureaucratic processes and paperwork. At the same time, the nonprofit sector was not meant to replace government as the primary agent of recovery. Rather it was to buttress the governmental response by filling in the gaps left by government.

In addition to these three studies, *GulfGov Reports* has released two special topics reports: one focusing on the impact of the hurricanes on the public school systems in the affected areas and the other on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance and the Community Development Block Grant monies that have been allocated to Louisiana and Mississippi.

The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government and the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana developed the *GulfGov Reports* research series to provide a broad look at how the storms have changed these communities across a wide spectrum of areas. This is a long-term project that has been tracking the progress these communities make — or do not make — over time.

The jurisdictions chosen for the project are representative of the areas that were devastated by the storms or that have benefited from them. They cover three of the four states affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita — Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The areas under study in the first two reports were: Cameron Parish, East Baton Rouge Parish, Jefferson Parish, Kenner, Lake Charles, New Orleans, St. Bernard Parish, and St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana; Hancock County (Bay St. Louis and Waveland), Harrison County

(Biloxi and Gulfport), Hattiesburg, Jackson, Jackson County (Pascagoula), and Laurel in Mississippi; and Bayou La Batre, Gulf Shores, and Mobile in Alabama.

For the nonprofit report, the project focused primarily on areas devastated by the storms — New Orleans, St. Bernard Parish, and Cameron Parish in Louisiana; the Mississippi Gulf Coast; and Bayou La Batre in Alabama. It also looked at the communities of Lake Charles, Louisiana, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, both of which sustained significant damage in the storms, as well as at two communities that suffered relatively little damage — East Baton Rouge Parish in Louisiana and Mobile in Alabama.

This latest study looks at some of the areas still working to recover — Cameron Parish, St. Bernard Parish, and New Orleans in Louisiana and Bay St. Louis (Hancock County), Biloxi, and Gulfport (Harrison County) in Mississippi — as well as at three communities that have benefited from the shift in population and business — Lake Charles and St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana and Hattiesburg in Mississippi.

*GulfGov Reports* is an ongoing longitudinal field network study of a representative sample of communities damaged by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. The previous reports in this project were developed from uniformly structured field research reports put together by a network of researchers from a range of backgrounds and social science disciplines. Throughout this project, the field researchers have collected and analyzed data and reports and interviewed public officials, leaders of nonprofit and community organizations, and members of the community. The field researchers' reports were guided by a standard format of open-ended and closed-ended research questions. These individual reports then were submitted to the central study staff, reviewed, and compiled into summary reports. This most recent report also used a set of open- and closed-ended questions in gathering information. Over the course of three months, the researcher collected data through interviews, official reports, other studies, Internet databases, and media accounts. This report is a compilation of those efforts and an analysis of the information gathered.

## Regional Recovery Plans

### Mississippi

Almost immediately after Katrina struck, Governor Haley Barbour created a 50-member Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal and asked it to come up with a plan to “restore what was lost” and make the Gulf Coast “better than ever.”

Together with a few hundred volunteers who served on 13 committees, the commission held a six-day Mississippi Renewal Forum in October 2005. A national group of 100 architects, planners, development experts, and others organized by the Chicago-based Congress for the New Urbanism gathered in Biloxi to brainstorm designs and proposals for rebuilding that could serve as examples for the affected communities. In addition, the commission held town hall meetings across 33 Mississippi counties to gather input from thousands of residents about how they wanted their communities to recover. It also took comments from some 800 other residents via e-mail, telephone, and an online forum. Funding for the project came in large part from the John L. and James S. Knight Foundation. In addition, many members of the team assembled by the Congress for the New Urbanism donated their time and services.

Local officials and residents focused on a variety of topics in these meetings. In Hancock County, which is home to Bay St. Louis and Waveland, residents discussed how to consolidate public services, provide quality affordable housing, set up a county-wide transportation system, and redevelop Beach Boulevard. Residents in Harrison County (Biloxi and Gulfport) wanted to make sure that any plans drawn up took into account the area’s heritage and sense of place, while at the same time addressing economic and development issues. Residents also were interested in the consolidation of public services. In Jackson County, where Pascagoula is the largest city, residents were concerned about the impact of FEMA’s flood elevation requirements and their effect on the cost of rebuilding, financing, and flood insurance.

The result of these meetings was a 190-page report with 238 recommendations that was issued late in December 2005. The report addressed 11 major areas — land use; transportation; public services; housing; tourism; small business; agriculture, forestry, and marine resources; defense and government contracting; education; health and human services; and nongovernmental organizations—with recommendations for each.

In addition, the commission published *A Pattern Book for Gulf Coast Neighborhoods* as a resource for local homeowners, architects, builders, and officials to use in the rebuilding effort. The goal of the pattern book was to encourage rebuilding in a manner consistent with the Gulf Coast’s traditional architectural and neighborhood design. Besides providing the basis for the commission’s overall report, the Mississippi Renewal Forum also produced individual reports for the 11 coastal communities that offered ideas and suggestions for rebuilding, as well as a series of special reports that focused on the environment, social needs, economic development, architecture, and code issues.

Following the release of the commission’s reports, Governor Barbour created an Office of Recovery and Renewal to oversee long-term recovery efforts and to coordinate the work among federal and state agencies and other public and private entities. The office’s goals are to obtain the maximum amount of federal money available to help in the rebuilding and to make the best use of credit in lieu of cash; provide policy advice to

the governor, his staff, and state agencies; provide technical assistance, education, and outreach to local governments; and identify the entities most responsible for putting the overall report's recommendations into effect.

While the commission report's recommendations were specific and wide-ranging, they were advisory only. Rather than laying out a mandatory framework for recovery, the plan and its recommendations were designed from the beginning to show residents and local officials what ideas, options, and alternatives were available for rebuilding. Despite this, there has been disappointment that the local communities have not embraced more of the recommendations, and the governor is considering whether to reconvene the commission.

The most visible action to come out of the report's recommendations so far has been the creation of a regional utility authority to coordinate sewer, water, storm water, and other utility services in the state's six southernmost counties — Pearl River, Stone, George, Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson. But even that was not unanimous, as George County voted not to take part in the authority.

## Louisiana

The regional planning process took a different path in Louisiana. In the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Governor Kathleen Blanco established the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) and designated it the planning and coordinating body for the recovery and rebuilding of Louisiana. The LRA, in turn, developed the Louisiana Speaks initiative to help plan for South Louisiana's long-term recovery and growth. In January 2006, the LRA asked the Baton Rouge-based Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX) to coordinate the Louisiana Speaks process. CPEX grew out of a 1998 planning initiative called Plan Baton Rouge that was designed to implement a 1998 master plan for the redevelopment of downtown Baton Rouge by using Smart Growth principles and leveraged public investment.

Under the auspices of the LRA and CPEX, Louisiana Speaks' work was broken into four tracks: parish (or county) planning, neighborhood planning, urban design planning, and regional planning. The majority of the money for the work came through the privately funded LRA Support Foundation, but some funds also came through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as part of its Emergency Support Function #14 (ESF-14) long-term recovery planning work and from federal Community Development Block Grant funds allocated to LRA for recovery work.

The parish planning process focused on helping 19 of the most affected parishes develop their own long-term recovery plans. The demonstration neighborhood planning sessions (charrettes) were held in Lake Charles in southwest Louisiana, in St. Bernard Parish east of New Orleans, and in Vermilion Parish in the Acadiana region. Subsequent to these planning sessions, ESF-14 and recovery plans were developed for those communities. In addition, the *Louisiana Speaks Pattern Book* and *Louisiana Speaks Planning Toolkit* were developed as resources for individuals and communities to use as they rebuild.

The centerpiece of the Louisiana Speaks initiative, however, was the regional planning effort. A team of nationally recognized community and regional planners gathered input from a series of meetings with

diverse people across South Louisiana. About 1,000 people representing key sectors in Louisiana's economy participated in these workshops to help create future scenarios focused on issues involving economic development, infrastructure investment, land use, and coastal protection and restoration. The scenarios showed the differing impact over time if the region continued on its present course, took some action to change, or took extreme action. Using these scenarios, Louisiana Speaks created a survey that asked the public to indicate its priorities and preferences in those areas as the state moves forward. Altogether more than 23,000 Louisianans, including 1,300 hurricane evacuees living outside the state, responded to the survey.

Using the results of the survey, Louisiana Speaks developed the *Louisiana Speaks Regional Plan: Vision and Strategies for Recovery and Growth in South Louisiana*, which covers the 35 parishes of South Louisiana. The plan was released in May 2007. It details region-wide physical plans for the next 50 years, as well as 100 action items that support three broad goals for Louisiana: recover sustainably, grow smarter, and think regionally. CPEX now is working at the state level to implement some of those 100 action items.

In 2008, Louisiana Speaks and CPEX are focusing on 10 priorities. Among them are:

- **Establishing an Office of State Planning and establishing an independent Louisiana Speaks leadership group** — The first step in this effort was taken with the release of a report by the Office of State Planning Task Force. The report recommended that the office be located within the executive branch of state government, serve as a central repository for data and plans, provide technical help to local communities, and oversee incentive and program funding. In addition, Louisiana Speaks Inc., a nonprofit leadership group, has been created to serve as the long-term advocacy group for the plan's implementation.
- **Funding and building a regional transportation infrastructure** — This item encourages funding for infrastructure projects that will help with economic recovery and future evacuation needs.
- **Creating a "Louisiana Location Index"** — This index would be a publicly accessible database that would provide information about the suitability of land in Louisiana for various kinds of development.
- **Creating model development and zoning codes** — Although the codes would not have the force of law, they would give local governments a resource to use in developing their own land use plans. This project, called the Louisiana Land Use Toolkit, is already underway with funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Louisiana Department of Economic Development and is scheduled to be finished in early 2009.
- **Establishing a State Community Reinvestment Trust Fund** — The fund would support projects that focus on revitalizing communities and would work in conjunction with the Main Street program.
- **Establishing a State Conservation and Mitigation Trust Fund** — This fund would be used to acquire the rights to high-risk and/or environmentally sensitive lands. The 2007 Louisiana Legislature approved a study resolution to require the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources to provide a technical report for the establishment of a state coastal land trust.

## Analysis

Although both the Mississippi Governor's Commission and Louisiana Speaks regional plans attracted a great deal of attention when they were developed and released, both seem to have fallen out of the public eye. In both states, the regional planning efforts were complex and multi-layered, and focused on helping officials and residents develop creative visions of what the future could look like. The process also offered residents and local officials an opportunity to come up with new and imaginative ways to address longstanding infrastructure problems. The planning sessions were energetic and inspiring, and they brought together people from across both regions to discuss a common vision.

But planning and doing are two entirely different things, and many people have observed that neither regional plan has brought about significant change ... yet. While the disappointment is understandable, it misses a major point — these are long-term plans designed to effect change over many years. In addition, the Governor's Commission plan was intended to be primarily advisory in nature, while the Louisiana Speaks plan details explicit tasks to accomplish at the state and regional level.

As a result, the Governor's Commission plan lists 238 recommendations that are specific up to a point, but there is little to no information about how exactly to achieve them. Commission members were hopeful that the devastated communities would implement some of the recommendations but, ultimately, the decision on how to rebuild was always to be a local one.

In contrast, the Center for Planning Excellence is working on implementing the list of 100 action items specified in the Louisiana Speaks Regional Plan through a set of detailed strategic implementation plans. These policy guides focus on five key strategies — establishing a Louisiana State Office of Planning, developing a statewide framework for local comprehensive planning, financing transportation projects, developing technology transfer and geographic information systems, and identifying and removing obstacles to infill. CPEX already has had success in accomplishing some of the items outlined in the plan, but it has a long way to go.

Building the consensus and momentum for change is difficult. It is hard to convince people who are just trying to survive to look into a theoretical future. And there will always be those who simply have no interest in changing the way things are done, no matter what the circumstances. On the other hand, both regional plans clearly have a long-term outlook. Many of their elements will require discussion, negotiation, consensus-building, and funding to carry out. The challenge will be, as always, to find the patience and the will to take the incremental steps that ultimately could lead to better, stronger communities for all of the region's residents.

## Recovery Communities

### New Orleans, Louisiana

New Orleans has struggled with multiple recovery planning efforts since Hurricane Katrina struck. The first was that of the Urban Land Institute, which suggested that some of the city's lower-lying, more flood-prone areas should not be rebuilt. That plan was shelved amid the outcry from those who protested that there should be no limits on what areas of the city would be rebuilt. The land use committee of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring Back New Orleans Commission then proposed that the city enact a four-month moratorium on building permits while a neighborhood planning process underwritten by FEMA helped determine the most viable areas in which to rebuild. That proposal, too, died amid public outcry and FEMA's refusal to provide money for the planning process. The New Orleans City Council hired its own planners with \$3 million in Community Development Block Grant money to work on a rebuilding plan, known locally as the Lambert Plan. This plan, however, only dealt with flooded areas of the city.

Finally, at the urging of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, the Louisiana Recovery Authority, and Governor Kathleen Blanco, the city began a new planning process funded by \$3.5 million grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, \$1 million from the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and \$1 million from the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund. With the help of more consultants, the city set up a process that combined citizen participation with the efforts of professional planners to draw up a plan for rebuilding the city. As part of that process, teams of planners worked with residents across the city to develop 13 district plans, seeking input on which areas and projects the city should focus on and in what order. Another group of planners focused on developing an overall Citywide Plan, which came to be known as the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP). UNOP offered a vague, confusing, sometimes contradictory set of recommendations with an estimated price tag of \$14 billion, and while it included some projects from the district plans, the district plans, in fact, were not completed until after the Citywide Plan was released.



*The repaired Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science & Technology in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*Photographer: FEMA/ Manny Broussard*

Although the plan was made public in January 2007, it was not formally adopted by the City Council until six months later. In the meantime, the city's Office of Recovery and Development Administration under the direction of Dr. Edward Blakely created the Blakely Plan, which calls for the city to focus on investing in the recovery of 18 target zones throughout New Orleans and costs an estimated \$1.1 billion. The hope is that a combination of public and private money can be leveraged to redevelop/revamp these areas, and the rebuilding will spread out from there.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin hired Blakely in January 2007 to jump-start the city's recovery process. Blakely is an internationally recognized expert in helping communities rebuild after catastrophic events. Shortly after Blakely released the details of the target zone plan, he confidently predicted that residents would see cranes in the sky over the city by September 2007. That did not happen, providing further evidence of how complex the rebuilding task is in New Orleans. Even so, the mayor and other city officials have described 2008 as a turning point for New Orleans. Government leaders now have roughly \$750 million in hand from a variety of sources and a list of more than 100 rebuilding projects that they are moving on, guided in part by the Blakely Plan. In addition, the city has hired an outside firm to oversee its work on the rebuilding projects and keep residents updated through a Web site. Among the city's goals for 2008 are building more affordable housing units, rebuilding public infrastructure, and attracting more business investment.

There are other signs of progress. The city has reclaimed its reputation for staging big parties, with a successful run of events beginning with the New Orleans Bowl in December 2007, followed by the Sugar Bowl, the BCS Championship Game, Mardi Gras, and the NBA All-Star Game in January and February 2008. Road and sewer repairs are under way, and many private commercial ventures and nonprofit efforts are focused on rebuilding housing. Traditional business districts like Harrison Avenue in Lakeview and Carrollton Avenue in Mid-City have come back to life, while more and more people are moving into once abandoned neighborhoods.

How many people now live in the city continues to be a matter of debate, however. City officials estimate the population to have reached about 300,000, or roughly two-thirds of its pre-Katrina number. The U.S. Census Bureau, on the other hand, puts New Orleans' population at about 275,000. The city's repopulation rate also has slowed down, meaning fewer people are moving in, and the distribution of the population is uneven. Neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward, for instance, have regained only a fraction of their population. There are other problems. The number of abandoned and blighted properties is growing, and city officials have yet to devise an effective way to handle the problem, while many small businesses are struggling. In addition, services like health care, child care, and public transportation are still in short supply, and the city's crime rate continues to defy solution.

While the physical boundaries of the city remain the same, the character of many of its neighborhoods has changed and will continue to change as the recovery proceeds. New Orleans today remains a tale of two cities. Those areas least affected by Katrina — such as the French Quarter, the Garden District, and Uptown — look much as they did before the storm. Other areas — such as Lakeview, the Ninth Ward, Gentilly, Mid-City, and Eastern New Orleans—face substantial changes and likely will bear little resemblance to their pre-Katrina appearance.

## **St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana**

St. Bernard Parish was one of the areas hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina and the recovery has lagged as officials have struggled to find the resources to pay for the rebuilding work. Virtually every structure in the parish was flooded by Katrina, and when the floodwaters finally receded, St. Bernard found itself with neighborhoods of abandoned homes, a business community that was in ruins, and a population that had largely fled to the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

Today, less than half of the pre-storm population of 68,000 has returned, and rebuilding efforts are scattered across small pockets of the parish. While the parish's sales tax revenues are now at 75 percent of pre-Katrina levels, only a limited number of major retailers have resumed or started up operations. Officials are trying to market the parish's growth potential, but the low population numbers make it difficult to attract businesses. In addition, the parish still has no hospital, although local officials are considering offers from two organizations to build and operate a facility.

St. Bernard officials and residents were among the early participants in the long-term planning initiative organized by Louisiana Speaks and took part in one of the demonstration charrettes in the spring of 2006. Out of those meetings, planners crafted a report that offered three different rebuilding scenarios for residents to consider as well as suggestions for public transportation, neighborhood centers, a St. Bernard Parish Town Center, and Jackson Barracks. But the work of translating the vision outlined in the report into reality stalled as residents and officials struggled with the lack of resources and with competing ideas of how the parish should recover.

In January of this year, a new parish government administration took over after elections in November 2007, and among its first actions was the development of a 100-day plan for rebuilding called the "St. Bernard Parish Recovery and Growth Plan." The plan describes in detail what steps and what projects the parish will work on in 11 categories — partnerships, recreation, water and sewer services, public buildings, roads, resident services and compliance, demolition and debris, economic development, health care, administrative services, and coastal issues.

Using a combination of FEMA funds, private contributions, and local government financing, the parish has begun work on rebuilding recreation facilities, government buildings, roads, and water and sewer infrastructure. Parish officials also have reorganized their administrative offices in an effort to be more responsive to residents and to be more efficient in their operations. In addition, parish officials are continuing to press the federal government to close the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and to begin work on coastal restoration projects. Still, the long-term recovery work in St. Bernard has just begun to take shape, and while parish leaders and residents are determined to rebuild, a lot of uncertainty remains.

## **Cameron Parish, Louisiana**

Cameron Parish took the brunt of Hurricane Rita's force in Louisiana. The storm, which struck on September 24, 2005, rolled across Cameron Parish with an approximately 15-foot surge, badly damaging or destroying more than 6,000 structures in the parish, including most of the buildings housing parish

government offices. All of those buildings were in the town of Cameron, which sits right on the Gulf of Mexico. The only government building left relatively intact was the Cameron Parish Courthouse, which was also the only building left standing after Hurricane Audrey leveled the parish in 1957. Today, more than two and a half years after Rita struck, most of the parish's governmental entities still operate out of temporary buildings set up behind the courthouse.

Beginning in January 2006, the Community Design Workshop (CDW), which is part of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette School of Architecture and Design, sent students to Cameron to gather information and hold a charrette to get residents' input on how they wanted to rebuild their community. Support for the initiative came from a grant from the Center for Planning Excellence through the LRA. Among the issues discussed were the creation of a judicial complex, redevelopment of the town's commercial area, and strengthening neighborhoods. Residents and officials also were interested in suggestions for developing nearby Monkey Island and for ways to rebuild homes and buildings so that they would be better able to withstand another hurricane. The CDW then compiled everything in a redevelopment report that it submitted to the town.

The planning process in Cameron was multi-layered. In addition to the efforts of the Community Design Workshop, the parish engaged in a "storefront planning process" conducted by the LRA that produced a list of some 30 long-term recovery projects. The storefront process was followed by a parish-wide consensus planning effort in the spring of 2006. The consensus planning effort resulted in a list of 10 recovery projects, including the Cameron Square governmental complex project.

From the recommendations developed in the CDW report, as well as those that came out of the storefront and parish-wide consensus planning efforts, the Cameron Parish Police Jury voted to start with the Cameron Square project. The \$45 million project is multi-faceted, calling for construction of a Civic Complex and development of the waterfront area directly in front of the complex. Funding would come from



*Cameron Parish  
Courthouse with  
Hurricane Rita marker in  
Cameron, Louisiana.*

*Photographer: Karen Rowley*

a combination of federal, state, and local sources, including capital outlay and fishery funds, proceeds from a pilot bond issue, insurance money, FEMA Public Assistance money, and future parish tax bond proceeds.

The Civic Complex would include three new buildings, which would house offices for the tax assessor, the district attorney, the police jury administration, and the sheriff. In addition, the courthouse would be renovated and upgraded to provide more space for the district judge and the clerk of court. The waterfront portion of the project would include development of a wharf, marina, restaurant, harbor master's office, an ice house, a seafood market, and lodging. Linking the Civic Complex and the waterfront development would be a central square and plaza.

The policy jury decided to make the Cameron Square Project its top priority because of the need to re-establish essential governmental services and the desire to signal to the outside world that the parish's long-term recovery is under way and that it is open for business.

Despite the police jury's optimism and the fact that work has begun on the project, Cameron Parish continues to struggle. Most of the rebuilding activity remains concentrated in the northern part of the parish, while progress is painstakingly slow in the devastated coastal communities. Only about half of the population who lived in the southern part of Cameron has returned. Many people have found they cannot afford to rebuild because of insurance and elevation requirements. Instead, they are simply putting mobile homes on their empty lots. They cannot afford insurance and they cannot afford to elevate their homes. If another hurricane comes, they will just evacuate and then replace the mobile home later.

Businesses operating in the southern part of Cameron also are struggling, and parish officials say it is difficult to attract new ones because of the area's small population base. While the hospital has reopened, no supermarkets have returned to the area, and only one of two convenience stores has gasoline pumps. The fishing industry that has been a mainstay of the parish for decades has not fully recovered either, and there are questions about whether it will.

### **Bay St. Louis, Mississippi**

Bay St. Louis, which is located along the Gulf Coast in Hancock County, was one of the communities hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina. The storm's surge reached 30 feet along much of the shoreline, and little was left standing in a city known for its small shops and boutiques, eclectic restaurants, and generally relaxed lifestyle. With its business base virtually wiped out, Bay St. Louis has struggled to find the funding to kick-start its recovery. Only two casinos operate in the city, compared with eight in Biloxi, so while the gambling revenue has been important, it has not provided the same economic boost as it has in Biloxi.

Nine representatives from the city, including the mayor, took part in the Mississippi Renewal Forum, at which planners and architects drew up a possible plan for recovery and future growth. The plan focused on retaining the city's small-town character, rebuilding its architectural heritage, and making U.S. 90 more inviting as an entryway. Designs were created for incorporating more open space, rebuilding the city's traditional neighborhoods, establishing new neighborhoods, and redeveloping the waterfront and Depot



*U.S. Highway 90 in Biloxi, Mississippi, before (top) and after repair from damage caused by Hurricane Katrina.*

*Photographer: FEMA/Mark Wolfe*

District areas. The plan also recommended that city officials revise zoning laws and adopt Smart Code practices to guide rebuilding, as well as develop a long-term strategy to build affordable housing.

A year after the work of the Governor's Commission, Bay St. Louis embarked on its own planning process, engaging a citizen advisory committee and a planning firm to help it revise the city's Comprehensive Plan. That process, which is being paid for by \$255,000 from the Mississippi Development Authority, started in October 2006, and a draft of the plan was submitted to the City Council in June 2007. The council is still holding neighborhood meetings and soliciting the public's input on the proposed plan.

Once adopted, the Comprehensive Plan will be used to guide zoning laws and the planning processes for development, housing, infrastructure, and public works. In the meantime, Bay St. Louis is moving forward with a long list of infrastructure improvement projects for which it has organized funding. The city has pieced together approximately \$30 million from FEMA, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, the Mississippi Development Authority, the Mississippi Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to rebuild fire stations, recreational facilities, a senior citizens complex, and the Bay St. Louis Community Hall. The money also will be used for various road projects and streetscape work. In addition, the city is planning some \$70 million in utility infrastructure projects, which will be funded entirely by FEMA, and it will be the beneficiary of a \$30 million seawall project paid for by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The list of projects is extensive, and while work will begin on some of them this year, others will take years to begin and complete.

Bay St. Louis officials also are arguing strenuously with FEMA about the agency's proposed flood elevation requirements. As the situation stands now, some 60 percent of the city could be designated high-risk; meaning homes in those areas could have to be built upward of 20 feet high. That, officials say,



*Residents in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, look at new preliminary flood maps at an open house in Hancock County. The event kicks off community adoption of the Digital Flood Insurance Rate Maps to meet requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program.*

*Photographer: FEMA/Jennifer Smits*

could make it virtually impossible for residents to rebuild because of the increased construction costs. Insurance costs also are higher in high-risk areas, and many homeowners could find themselves unable to afford the premiums even if they can afford to rebuild. In addition, if the city fails to adopt the elevation requirements, then no homeowner within the city limits will be allowed to enroll in the National Flood Insurance Program. The state's position is that it will support Bay St. Louis in its efforts to appeal the FEMA elevation requirements as long as the city is not trying to delay implementation so that homeowners can rebuild in vulnerable areas and be grandfathered in under the new rules.

## **Gulfport, Mississippi**

In Gulfport, which is in Harrison County, the mayor has declared 2008 the “Year of Bricks and Mortar” — a reference to the city's intention to continue rebuilding projects now under way and to begin work on numerous others. Funding for the long list totals nearly \$775 million, with the majority coming from the federal government. The largest portion of the funding — \$600 million — is marked for redevelopment work at the Port of Gulfport, which was severely damaged by Katrina. Specifically, the \$600 million comes from \$5.1 billion in federal Community Development Block Grant money that Congress allocated to Mississippi to help homeowners rebuild. Governor Barbour's decision to spend the \$600 million on the port has been the focus of a great deal of controversy. Housing advocates say there is still a housing crisis on the coast and the money is needed to help those still living in trailers and those who can't afford to rebuild their homes. The governor and other officials say it is critical to help the port because of the potential for jobs and revenue created by a fully recovered facility.

Besides the port project, more than 50 public works projects totaling \$46 million have been approved for Gulfport and are in various stages of development. The projects are all fully funded with federal money and will encompass road, sewer, water, and drainage needs. Among the projects will be widening of evacuation routes, and repairing or replacing damaged and outdated water and drainage systems. FEMA also has approved spending \$50 million to \$70 million for similar infrastructure projects south of the CSX railroad tracks.

In addition, repairs have been completed on 42 city-owned facilities, work is proceeding on 67 more, and planning is under way for 40 others — at a cost of more than \$18 million. The city also has spent more than \$2 million on its piers, jetties, and boat launches. Further, the city is spending approximately \$12.1 million to restore its downtown district. Despite all of this, Gulfport is still contending with a large number of abandoned homes and businesses across the city. In response to complaints from residents and business owners who have rebuilt, officials are trying to find ways to persuade the laggard owners to clean up and secure or demolish their properties.

The city also contracted with a planning firm out of Florida to help it devise a redevelopment plan for several pieces of city-owned property. The \$750,000 contract was funded with a grant from the Mississippi Development Authority.

In particular, officials were looking for a plan to guide their redevelopment of the 90-acre U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs property, which the federal government is expected to turn over to Gulfport. But they also wanted suggestions for redeveloping such properties as the Ken Combs Pier, the Small Craft Harbor, and the sports complex. The planners held a 10-day design conference in January at which focus groups were encouraged to come up with ideas for transportation, infrastructure, heritage and conservation, code enforcement, market feasibility, and public works and public safety. The design proposals that resulted from the conference's work were presented to the public at the end of January and received mostly positive reviews. As of this writing, the Gulfport City Council had yet to formally adopt the plans. However, the city is moving ahead with a \$24.8 million redevelopment plan for the Small Craft Harbor property, which came out of the design conference, and work is set to begin in June 2008.

The impetus for much of what Gulfport is doing with the rebuilding and recovery projects it has under way can be traced back to the plan developed for the city by planners taking part in the Mississippi Renewal Forum. During the conference in October 2005, teams of planners met with officials and residents from each of the 11 coastal communities to get their ideas, comments, and thoughts on how their communities should rebuild. The information gathered from those meetings was then crafted into a reconstruction plan specific to each community. Gulfport's plan offered suggestions about revitalizing the downtown district, redesigning and renovating the port, redeveloping an underused park and creating a more formal system of parks and open spaces, rebuilding the city's historic neighborhoods, and developing a zoning code based on Smart Code principles. Aspects of all of these recommendations can be seen in the bricks-and-mortar work the city is doing now.

## Biloxi, Mississippi

In contrast to Gulfport, the neighboring city of Biloxi has made considerably more progress in cleaning up abandoned properties. Instead of the ruined and wrecked structures that line parts of U.S. 90 in Gulfport, visitors are more apt to see casinos, vacant lots, and large signs advertising coming development along the beachfront highway in Biloxi.

Biloxi also has a plan for recovery and rebuilding. Called Reviving the Renaissance, the plan is the result of a process that mirrored the one the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal used to develop its recommendations. Some 200 volunteers served on the committees that put together the 162 recommendations offered by Reviving the Renaissance. Those recommendations covered 12 areas — affordable housing, transportation, land use, historic preservation, tourism, small business, seafood industry and marine resources, military and government contracting, education, health and human services, nongovernmental organizations, and finance — and were released in a report in the spring of 2006. Although the Biloxi City Council ultimately declined to formally adopt the plan, the city has, nevertheless, been using it as its guide to rebuilding.

The idea for the Reviving the Renaissance plan came out of the Mississippi Renewal Forum, at which teams of planners, state and local officials, and residents brainstormed ideas for rebuilding the coast. The plan for Biloxi focused on a 10-point list of areas for the city to address — cleanup, preservation, neighborhood reconstruction, downtown redevelopment, the casino corridor and East Biloxi, the Back Bay harbor, Beach Boulevard redevelopment, connectivity and walkability, infrastructure, and codes and administration. What the Reviving the Renaissance plan did was develop specific recommendations to address each of the 10 areas.

Like his counterpart in Gulfport, the mayor of Biloxi expects 2008 to be a year when the city will make significant progress. Approximately \$153.9 million in public improvement projects have been approved and \$137 million in funding is in place to get the work started. Biloxi also has applied for \$450 million in federal



*Trailer home in Biloxi, Mississippi.*

*Photographer: Jennifer Pike*

money to repair and replace streets, drainage, water and sewer, and other infrastructure throughout the city. Repair plans are being drawn up as well for the Biloxi Lighthouse, several fire stations, City Hall, and the City Hall Annex, among other projects.

City officials also have contracted with a Pennsylvania company to develop a new comprehensive plan, make changes to the Land Development Ordinance, and write architectural design standards and subdivision regulations. Funding from the Mississippi Development Authority will pay for the contract. The city's current comprehensive plan was adopted in 1996, and officials intended it to guide Biloxi's growth for 25 years. But Katrina changed everything, and officials determined they needed a new plan. Over the next few months, the planners will hold public meetings to get residents' comments, thoughts, and ideas. Among the topics planners will address are affordable housing, future development along U.S. 90 and in East Biloxi, the potential for mixed-use developments, and how to strengthen the hospitality industry.

### Analysis

Even before they had recovery plans in place, the cities in this study had begun the process of rebuilding. At first the work just involved clearing debris. Before anything else could happen, city officials had to create access to their communities. Then came the assessment stage as they determined what was unsalvageable, what could be repaired or rebuilt, and what was functional. Then the big question: How should they rebuild?

In whatever form it took, this question is what the planning process sought to answer. How should communities that were leveled by Katrina or Rita or that sat in floodwaters for weeks rebuild? Should they simply rebuild what existed before the storms, or should they take advantage of the opportunity to make changes? In the discussions that were at the heart of the planning, other questions were broached and debated: What aspects of the community should be kept? What aspects should change? Where will the money come from? How can a consensus for change be reached among residents?

Like the regional plans previously discussed, the local plans are notable for the wide-ranging vision they show. All of the communities in this study used the planning process to imagine the possibilities for rebuilding better and stronger. The major issues were the same: infrastructure repair and improvement, expansion of economic development opportunities, and redevelopment of neighborhoods and housing. The most specific recommendations in the local plans centered on infrastructure and economic development, even though they all acknowledged the importance of an adequate supply of available, affordable housing. That makes sense considering that funding is available from a variety of sources for infrastructure and economic development projects. The length of time it takes to access the money and the amount of paperwork required are problematic because they slow the process down. But the money is available, and once it is finally allocated and disbursed, the pace of the recovery picks up considerably as in the communities discussed above.

Housing is a different matter. When it comes to the housing issue, local officials can control what types of housing they will allow and where. So, for instance, they can decide to demolish outdated housing projects in New Orleans and make way for mixed-use developments to be built for low-income residents. Or local officials in several Mississippi coastal communities can decide that the Mississippi Cottages that were

designed to be an affordable solution to the housing crisis are really nothing more than glorified trailers and refuse to allow their permanent installation.

What local officials cannot control are two of the biggest factors slowing the recovery — insurance and flood elevation requirements. Insurance costs have risen to such an extent that many people who could rebuild or buy a home in the affected areas cannot afford to insure it. At the same time, FEMA has raised the flood elevation requirements along most of the coastal area. That, in turn, increases construction costs and puts rebuilding out of reach for many residents. In this instance, the local recovery plans are of no help. With the exception of Biloxi's Reviving the Renaissance plan, what recommendations there are about housing tend to focus on designs and code requirements that would make the rebuilt structures more hurricane-resistant, and therefore even more expensive to build.

Almost immediately after the crisis aspect of the hurricanes had passed, the calls began for the affected communities to develop plans for how they would recover, and many planning meetings were held in the late fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006. In the case of Bay St. Louis, Biloxi, Gulfport, Cameron Parish, and St. Bernard Parish, they had plans by the summer of 2006. What they did not have was funding. So implementation of the plans was delayed. In the case of New Orleans, it went through multiple planning efforts before settling on one plan in the summer of 2007, almost a year later. Rebuilding efforts in each of these communities did not wait, however. They began as soon as residents and officials could get back in. While residents cleaned out and cleaned up their homes, city officials worked on re-establishing critical infrastructure — roads, water and sewer service, electricity, and so forth. Recovery plans are not necessary for rebuilding to begin. Rebuilding will happen, whether a plan exists or not. New Orleans is the primary example of this. That does not mean that recovery plans are not needed. They are because they bring order to the recovery and they offer a sense of what the possibilities are in a world that has changed dramatically.

Ultimately, the local recovery plans will serve as the framework for how these communities will rebuild. Some of the recommendations they contain probably will never come to fruition, but a lot will. In doing so, they will change the face of these communities permanently.

## Growth Communities

### Lake Charles, Louisiana

**L**ake Charles in Calcasieu Parish was one of the sites of a Louisiana Speaks demonstration charrette. The city, its officials, and its residents played a key role in the days after Hurricane Katrina struck, providing shelter and support for evacuees from New Orleans. Then, less than a month later, the city found itself in the path of Hurricane Rita and was forced to evacuate.

Rita's surge, which was still at 8 feet when it reached Lake Charles, flooded much of the city's lakefront area, while the storm's winds badly damaged many downtown structures as well as thousands of homes. After the immediate crisis was over, the city took part in the charrette to develop a recovery and growth plan for the future.

Like many cities, Lake Charles had struggled for years with a stagnant downtown. Well before Rita struck, officials had begun to consider ways to revive the area. After Rita, officials and residents took part in the LRA-sponsored planning session to discuss how the community should rebuild and grow. Those discussions led to the creation of a parish-wide economic development and infrastructure improvement plan called Calcasieu 2025. The \$200 million plan sought to fund road, drainage, and water and sewer infrastructure improvements, business development and tourism initiatives, education, and public safety and emergency response measures. Lake Charles, specifically, would have received \$25 million for downtown redevelopment. Funding for the entire plan would have come from a \$5 million increase in property taxes, a quarter-cent increase in sales taxes, and the diversion of some gambling revenue. The plan went before voters in July 2006. While the measure was approved by voters in the city of Lake Charles, it ultimately failed because voters in the larger parish rejected it.

City officials, however, went back to city voters, who approved a \$90 million bond issue in November 2006. Proceeds from the bond issue will be used to fund a variety of projects: \$31.5 million for local roads, \$15 million for the local match for state road projects, \$21 million for utility improvements, \$18 million for downtown development, \$5 million for economic development, and \$3 million for the Community Development Fund. Voters subsequently approved a lakefront development referendum in May 2007, amending the City Charter to adopt a plan for public and private development of the lakefront and authorizing the city to put the plan into effect. In addition, voters authorized the city to contract with a nonprofit corporation to build the America's Wetland Discovery Center on the lakefront.

In addition to the \$18 million from the bond issue designated for downtown development, city officials will look for other private and public funding sources to complete the entire lakefront/downtown revitalization project. That project is laid out in the Lakefront Downtown Action and Development Plan, which was approved by the Downtown Development Authority and the City Council earlier this year. The plan is a long-range one that categorizes projects according to whether they are short-, medium-, or long-term. The time frame for the projects ranges from six to 24 months to more than five years.

## St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana

St. Tammany Parish, on the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain, was already experiencing rapid growth before Hurricane Katrina struck. Since the storm, however, the growth has accelerated as people and businesses have moved in from New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish. St. Tammany's population now stands at roughly 275,000. Prior to the storm, parish officials had estimated it would take 10 years to reach 300,000 people.

With the growth, the parish's roads are stretched beyond capacity, and its public services are strained. When Katrina hit, the parish had just finished work on a 10-Year Capital Infrastructure Plan. After some adjustments, that plan has become the parish's guide for dealing with the growth. Already, the first piece of the plan, which will address road capacity, has been funded with a \$50 million bond sale. In addition, the parish is embarking on an effort to rezone all of the unincorporated areas using new zoning codes adopted in 2007. The goal of the zoning codes is to allow more flexibility in development but also to balance economic growth with land conservation. The parish also will become home to "University Square," a multi-school campus that will house branches of two universities, a community college, and a St. Tammany Parish School District high school.

For all of the growth, however, the situation in St. Tammany is still very much a tale of two communities. Slidell, which is at the eastern end of the parish, was badly damaged by Katrina's high winds and water. About two-thirds of the city flooded, and approximately 8,500 residences out of the city's 10,500 sustained some type of damage. All of the city government buildings, except the Public Operations Building, were severely damaged, and all but two of those were a total loss. City Hall is still boarded up, and the city's government continues to operate out of temporary trailers set up near the Public Operations Building. The city has no formal rebuilding plan in place. However, repair work has begun on many of the buildings, and federal reimbursement money for work already done on the city's drainage and sewer systems has started to arrive.



*City Government trailers in Slidell, Louisiana.*

*Photographer: Karen Rowley*

## Hattiesburg, Mississippi

With its fortuitous location approximately 50 miles north of the Mississippi coast, Hattiesburg has benefited greatly from an influx of people and businesses since Katrina struck. Development has been heaviest to the west of the city along the U.S. 98 corridor where businesses, office parks, and multi-family housing are springing up.

In the spring of 2008, the mayor unveiled a plan to address some of the city's increasing infrastructure needs. Called Progress Hattiesburg, the plan would have increased the sales tax on a variety of items by 1 percent. The hope was that the tax would raise approximately \$10 million each year, which would have been used to pay for an assortment of road, water and sewer, and other infrastructure projects totaling more than \$30 million. The tax, which would have ended when the last project was completed, was approved by the City Council, but it needed approval from the Mississippi Legislature, the governor, and the voters in Hattiesburg. Although Governor Barbour indicated he would approve the tax increase, the measure died in the Legislature after strong opposition from some Hattiesburg-area legislators.

While Progress Hattiesburg failed to gain the needed approval, the city at the same time was completing a preliminary version of its updated Comprehensive Plan. The original plan was adopted in 1988 when the city was much smaller in physical size and population. Now some 54 square miles in size with a population of about 50,000 within the city limits and more than 120,000 in the Hattiesburg metropolitan area, the city has outgrown its Comprehensive Plan. Although the growth had begun well before Katrina hit, the storm accelerated the process.

The new plan was developed out of the city's 1999-2000 neighborhood planning program called "Neighborhoods Building Hattiesburg's Future," which resulted in the creation of 37 neighborhood associations, boundary maps and demographic profiles of each neighborhood, and the establishment of an office of neighborhood planning within the city's Department of Urban Development. In March 2007, the mayor, the City Council, and the Hattiesburg Planning Commission appointed a 14-member Vision Advisory Team to gather information, ideas, and opinions to craft an updated plan. In addition, the city held a series of neighborhood workshops to seek residents' input.

The preliminary version of the updated plan was released in May 2008, and officials began seeking public comment for the final version. Among the areas the plan focuses on are the character of Hattiesburg, the natural environment, land use and development, infrastructure, and community facilities and services. Over the course of 203 pages, it describes strategies and goals to be used in addressing each area. The document also takes a long-term view — 20 years — and notes that the plan should evolve as the city evolves.

Hattiesburg actually is located in two Mississippi counties. Most of the city lies within Forrest County, but a small portion spills over into neighboring Lamar County, which is on the west side of Forrest County. Much of the city's growth appears to be moving in a westward direction toward Lamar County as evidenced by the growth along U.S. 98. Currently, Lamar has no zoning laws, but county officials anticipate enacting spot zoning measures within the year, and they plan to start work on a comprehensive plan for the county.

## Analysis

For the communities that are doing well in the wake of the hurricanes, the planning challenges are different from those of the devastated areas. St. Tammany Parish, for example, was growing rapidly before Katrina and Rita struck, but the storms accelerated that growth. Parish officials had a long-term development plan in place, but had to revise it when the growth exceeded the projections used to design the plan. In contrast, Lake Charles was losing population before Rita hit, while Hattiesburg was growing very slowly prior to Katrina. Neither community had any sort of long-term development plan in place, but the hurricanes pushed officials into creating one.

There are some other differences between these plans and the recovery plans developed by the harder hit communities. In the case of St. Tammany Parish with its Capital Infrastructure Plan and Hattiesburg with Progress Hattiesburg, the plans seem to be geared around infrastructure improvement projects needed to ease the strain caused by the growth. The plans also are self-funded. St. Tammany has funding for its plan from a bond issue, while Hattiesburg officials would have used the money generated by a 1 percent increase in the sales tax rate to pay for their projects. Hattiesburg's updated comprehensive plan, on the other hand, focuses on more general goals and strategies for future growth without detailing specific projects or funding sources. In Lake Charles, officials developed a broad-based plan that calls for infrastructure improvements as well as various development projects. The Lakefront Downtown Action and Development Plan will be funded through proceeds from the November 2006 bond issue and other public and private sources.

Since the projects in all of these plans are considered improvements, they do not qualify for federal recovery money, even though the need was brought about by the hurricanes. Federal recovery funds can be used only for repair or replacement of infrastructure and buildings damaged or destroyed in the storms. For communities like St. Tammany Parish, Lake Charles, and Hattiesburg, that means they have received little federal financial help to cope with the challenges the growth has created. The difference between these communities and those communities more severely damaged in the storms is that the former did not sustain catastrophic damage to their business and economic infrastructure. Officials in St. Tammany Parish, Lake Charles, and Hattiesburg have been able to draw on strong economic bases to push their growth plans forward, while their counterparts in more damaged areas have had to re-establish their economies before they could begin work on long-term recovery.

## Findings

Although many of the issues affecting the timely recovery of devastated communities are beyond the control of officials at all levels, this study found that there are some steps that can be taken to help communities begin rebuilding more quickly the next time disaster strikes.

- Having a clearly defined disaster response plan in place before a disaster may help shorten the time it takes a community to move into the long-term recovery aspect of catastrophic event.

While the focus of this study is on recovery plans, a community first must get through the immediate response phase of a disaster before beginning the long-term recovery process. Having a well-defined disaster response plan would enable officials to decide ahead of time how

to organize the restoration of such essential services as water and sewer, electricity, and communication. Clearly, officials would have to work in concert with electricity and phone service providers, but by determining the order in which individual segments of the city would have services restored, officials could give residents much-needed information about the best time to return. In addition, officials should have pre-arranged contracts in place to speed up such things as debris removal. Having a well-designed disaster response plan in place then could shorten the time it takes a community to begin the longer-term recovery work.

- The long-term recovery planning process should be started almost as soon as the immediate danger from the disaster has passed.

Although it can be difficult to convince residents and officials of the value of this type of planning when food, shelter, and essential government services are lacking, the sooner a community begins discussing what it wants to look like as it recovers, the sooner residents will be able to make their own decisions about whether and how to return. Catastrophic disasters also offer communities a chance to change the way they do things, try to resolve longstanding problems, and remake themselves in better ways — as long as they conduct such planning with the widest possible public input. In addition, having a future development plan, comprehensive plan, or zoning code in place before disaster strikes could help provide officials with a base from which to design a long-term recovery plan.

- Specific people within state and federal recovery offices should be designated as liaisons for local officials. These liaisons would be the key contacts for local officials as they try to navigate all the paperwork and other bureaucratic requirements necessary to gain access to recovery money.

One of the biggest complaints among local officials is the revolving door among state and federal personnel they have had to contend with in trying get approval for cleanup, repair, and recovery work. Having specific people assigned to devastated communities for the long term would make it easier for overburdened officials to navigate the paperwork necessary to gain access to recovery money and might speed the disbursement of recovery money.

- Federal recovery funding rules should be revised so that a new category is created to handle large-scale disasters. In addition, the application and disbursement procedures for that new category should be designed so as to allow the government to disburse recovery money as quickly as possible.

Without funding, even the most thorough and well-thought-out recovery plan can end up as just another doorstop. Much of the federal aid available for communities is reimbursement money. That means that financially strapped communities must somehow scrape the money together to begin the rebuilding process before the federal money pipeline begins to flow. Although there are some ways around the current federal requirement, they are time-consuming and place yet another burden on already overburdened local officials. Having a federal recovery aid mechanism in place that errs on the side of distributing money but makes it clear that penalties will be forthcoming for those who misuse the funds would give local officials access to much-needed funding at a critical time in their communities' recovery.

## Conclusion

Nearly three years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the recovery momentum finally seems to be accelerating. Rebuilding projects are well under way in most of the hardest hit communities, while those areas that have experienced rapid growth have expansion and improvement projects in place. Within 10 years, local officials estimate, most of these projects should be done and the recovery should be nearly complete.

Clearly the physical look of these communities will be different from what it was before Katrina and Rita struck. How extensive the difference will be will depend on how much of their rebuilding plans local officials are able to implement. The extent of the change also will depend on FEMA's final flood elevation requirements, as well as on what the insurance industry does in terms of rates because both of those factors will affect how homeowners rebuild. One less than desirable effect of these twin obstacles already can be seen in Cameron Parish. There, some property owners have simply placed mobile homes on their lots because they cannot afford to rebuild their homes. In some cases these mobile homes are side by side with rebuilt homes that tower above them on elevated piers. It creates a somewhat jarring juxtaposition that bears little resemblance to the landscape prior to Rita. Drastically elevated homes are beginning to appear along the Mississippi Gulf Coast as well, creating a view that stands in sharp contrast to what existed before Katrina.

State decisions also are playing a role in altering the nature of the devastated communities. In Mississippi, the Legislature's decision to allow the coastal casinos to rebuild on land has drastically affected the beachfront view in Biloxi. In Louisiana, the Legislature approved measures that dramatically changed the operations of New Orleans' school district, tax assessor system, criminal justice system, and levee management system and sent a strong signal that the previous way of doing things was no longer acceptable. And in all of the communities in this study, officials describe a new attitude among residents who are more willing to get involved, who are more interested in planning for a better future, and who are not willing to just return to the old ways.



*Elevated home built after Hurricane Katrina south of New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*Photographer: Rick Bird*

The rebuilding and growth plans examined in this study are evidence of this change. Initially, they provided a way for members of the public to get involved in making decisions about the future of their communities. Now the plans are providing the framework for the direction of the recovery. None of these plans was really necessary for recovery to take place. The communities damaged in the storms have been rebuilding in one way or another since the immediate danger passed. Local officials did not need a plan, for instance, to restore roads, water and sewer service, electricity, and other essential services. But they did need a plan to rebuild their communities in safer, stronger, and smarter ways. Ultimately these recovery and growth plans represent opportunity and something even more powerful in the face of a disaster — hope.

## Advisory Committee

- Chair: William F. Winter, former Governor of Mississippi, Attorney, Watkins Ludlam Winter and Stennis, P.A.
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- Ronald Mason, President, Jackson State University
- George Penick, Director, Gulf States Policy Institute, Rand Corporation
- James Richardson, Director, Public Administration Institute, E.J. Ourso College of Business, Louisiana State University

## Methodology

*GulfGov Reports* is a longitudinal field network study of a representative sample of state and local governments damaged by the Katrina and Rita hurricanes of 2005. The 22 sites in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama covered in this project are cities and counties (parishes) that experienced varied levels of destruction and economic effects following the twin disasters. The sample includes communities that experienced severe damage and concomitant population decline and others that experienced population and economic growth because of the influx of household and business evacuees. The research is based on uniformly structured field research reports by professional experts from a range of backgrounds and social science disciplines. Over the course of this research program, the field researchers will collect and analyze data and reports and interview public officials, leaders of nonprofit organizations and community organizations, and businesses. Field researchers do their own analysis of conditions and issues in the communities studied; their reports are guided by a standard format of open- and closed-ended research questions. Reports submitted by field researchers to the central study staff are reviewed and compiled into summary reports.

## RESEARCH STAFF

The **Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana** (PAR) is an independent voice, offering solutions to critical public issues in Louisiana through accurate, objective research and focusing public attention on those solutions. As a private, nonprofit research organization, PAR is supported through the tax-deductible membership contributions of thousands of Louisiana citizens who want better, more efficient, and more responsive government. Although PAR does not lobby, PAR's research gets results. Many governmental reforms can be traced to PAR recommendations. In addition to serving as a catalyst for governmental reform, PAR has an extensive program of citizen education, believing that the soundest way to achieve political progress is through deep-rooted public understanding and support rather than political pressure.

The **Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government** is the public policy research arm of the State University of New York. The Institute conducts studies and special projects to assist government and enhance the capacity of states and localities to meet critical challenges. Through its research, publications, and conferences, the Institute works with the best policy experts in the country and with top officials at all levels of government to forge creative solutions to public problems. The work of the Institute focuses on the role of state governments in the American federal system. Many of the Institute's projects are comparative and multistate in nature.

## PRINCIPAL AUTHOR

### **Karen Rowley**

*Special Projects Manager, Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana*

Karen Rowley joined the PAR staff in 2006 as special projects manager. Her professional experience is in journalism, including jobs with daily newspapers in Florida and North Carolina and serving as managing editor for *The Greater Baton Rouge Business Report* in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for eight years. She earned her bachelor of arts degree in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her master's degree in mass communication from Louisiana State University. More recently, she earned a Ph.D. in mass communication from Louisiana State University. Her research focuses on media and public affairs — specifically on statewide public affairs television and its role in the institution of state government — and she has been the lead author on articles published in such academic journals as *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *American Journalism* and *The Howard Journal of Communications*.

## CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

### **James C. Brandt**

*President, Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana*

Jim Brandt was appointed president of PAR in May 1999. He has more than 30 years of experience in government administration, public policy research, and nonprofit management. He is the author of more than 75 studies or reports in the areas of governmental finance, state and local tax issues, public administration, and governmental structure and organization. In addition, he has received numerous national, state, and local awards for his work. Prior to joining PAR, Mr. Brandt served for 12 years as president and CEO of the Bureau of Governmental Research in New Orleans. His previous professional experience also includes his affiliation with the Institute for Governmental Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, where he was the assistant director and senior associate. Mr. Brandt is an honors graduate of the University of Colorado where he earned a bachelor of arts degree in history and political science and was elected Phi Beta Kappa. He received his master's degree in community organization and planning from Tulane University.

### **Richard P. Nathan**

*Co-Director, Rockefeller Institute of Government*

Richard Nathan is co-director of the Rockefeller Institute and the Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the State University of New York at Albany. Dr. Nathan has written and edited books on the implementation of domestic public programs in the United States and on American federalism. Prior to coming to Albany, he was a professor at Princeton University. He served in the federal government as assistant director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, deputy undersecretary for welfare reform of the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare, and director of domestic policy for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (The Kerner Commission).