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One year since Hurricane Katrina: the rebuilding of Mississippi's Gulf Coast

By Jeff Lassahn
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I recently traveled to Mississippi's Gulf Coast with the volunteer organization Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) to assist in ongoing relief efforts there. It is painfully obvious, nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina laid waste to the region, that the market-based approach to relief and reconstruction has left the entire region devastated, generating even higher levels of social inequality.

No one driving along the Gulf Coast can miss the destruction. More astonishing, however, is the relative lack of rebuilding; in many cases, absolutely nothing has been done. Working in a relief organization provided some insight into why that is the case: the lack of a centralized, publicly funded and organized reconstruction program.

Nearly all the rebuilding has been left to private companies and relief organizations, primarily faith-based. Families and individuals whose lives and livelihoods have been decimated have largely been expected to fend for themselves. The results are huge profits for a small number of casinos, banks and construction firms and misery for almost everyone else.

The damage

Mississippi's 70-mile stretch of the Gulf Coast was battered by Katrina's 125-mile-an-hour winds last summer, and, in the words of one account, "inundated by a mountain of water, 25 feet high in places, with waves that reached 10 feet higher. The surge affected areas as much as 15 miles inland. When the water finally retreated and the winds calmed, 11 seaside

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communities were left in ruins, with more than 160 dead and 65,000 homes destroyed” (*St. Petersburg Times*). Residents refer to the storm as “our tsunami.”

I traveled along Highway 90, which follows the coast through the small cities and towns of Moss Point, Pascagoula, Biloxi and Gulfport, Mississippi. Years ago, this stretch of coastline was made into an artificial beach, normally in proximity to the state highway. At certain points, however, restaurants and stores were located right on the beach; these were almost all obliterated by Hurricane Katrina.



Beachfront near Highway 90

On the other side of the coastal highway, there is a block of large, expensive houses and commercial buildings. Much of this too is rubble, although some sturdier structures only sustained heavy damage. Few of these buildings have been repaired or are in the process of being repaired. Most commonly, one sees foundations of what used to be buildings now holding signs advertising debris removal, home rebuilding and the like.



Properties go unrepaired

Buildings a block north of the highway appeared more intact, but many homes still showed severe damage to roofs and walls. Some residents live in trailers alongside their damaged houses, or the remnants and foundations of a house, presumably awaiting the opportunity to rebuild. Chain restaurants and stores bore signs promising rebuilding and reopening, but these messages were belied by the adjacent piles of rubble and wind-damaged signposts.



Hurricane victims live in trailers

It was surprising to see that in most cases even luxurious beachfront homes

were not undergoing repair. The same holds true for the branches of large retail and commercial chains, despite the billions of dollars they ostensibly have available for rebuilding. Many have put their properties up for sale, presumably due to lack of funds or threats of further hurricanes. Apparently, there is no coherent plan for redevelopment, much less hurricane protection—the market decides how to remake the beachfront, and its verdict is to leave it, for the most part, in shambles.



Obliterated fast-food restaurant

Even the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi has been left waiting for money to rebuild. George Ohr was a native of Biloxi, renowned for his use of modern forms in pottery at the turn of the last century. Fortunately, collections of his work were undamaged by the hurricane, but the partially built museum was damaged by a casino barge that washed ashore. The museum’s web site says that “As with all of the Gulf Coast, the museum is waiting on the resolution of the wind versus water insurance issue—hopefully with resolution just around the corner—and rebuilding will begin.”



Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art

As opposed to local residents, small businesses and the art museum, two industries have clearly benefited from the hurricane: banks and casinos. The former are reaping profits from loans to cover rebuilding costs. One cynical billboard in the area proclaimed that banks and residents shared common interests. “Together We Rebuild,” says the Hancock Bank sign.

Prior to Katrina, Mississippi state law barred the location of casinos on land. While such establishments were restricted to floating structures in the Gulf, their parking garages, restaurants and other associated enterprises dotted the coastline. Unsurprisingly, most of the casinos’ floating structures were heavily damaged or destroyed; almost immediately, Mississippi law was changed to allow the casino industry to build on land.



Gulf Coast casino and rubble

With new, immense profits in sight, most of the casinos are being rebuilt, with reopenings scheduled for the latter part of 2006. The new materials and heavy equipment visible at the casino construction sites stand in stark contrast to the situation in the immediate surroundings. The casinos' supporting establishments, such as restaurants, tourist shops and other stores, lie damaged and untouched right in view of the gambling joints. A notable exception to this was a pawn shop. The so-called fringe economy has flourished as the desperation of struggling residents has no doubt grown.



A pawn shop

Casinos thrive on sucking the money out of such impoverished areas, and it shows: the Beau Rivage Resort and Casino in Biloxi has enough cash not only to rebuild, but to buy advertising space on about 20 continuous billboards along Interstate 10. The billboards, each with only a single comment, gradually describe the extravagance and opulence awaiting those who can afford to visit the Beau Rivage upon its reopening.

On the casino's web site, President and Chief Operating Officer George P.

Corchis, Jr. reports contentedly that “Immediately following Hurricane Katrina’s devastation, our parent company MGM MIRAGE made a commitment to our employees, their families and the entire Gulf Coast community to rebuild Beau Rivage and rebuild it quickly.”

Remarkably, 12 casinos find enough business to operate along the Mississippi coastline, with several more located up bays and rivers.

Condominiums are being repaired or rebuilt more rapidly than any other type of housing on the Gulf Coast. Farther inland, the wind and flood damage to businesses has mostly been repaired. Some damage is permanent, however, particularly where the business was already abandoned or its owners couldn’t handle the cost of rebuilding. Towns are thick with pawn shops, payday loan and check-cashing stores, most of which seem to have found it possible to rebuild and repair.

At any rate, in some cases, it is difficult to distinguish between hurricane damage and the effects of already existing deprivation. In Gulfport, Mississippi, for example, we passed through a neighborhood in which abandoned, boarded up house—present in every poverty-stricken neighborhood in America—stood next to dwellings that had obviously sustained flood damage.

Relief organizations were repairing other houses, as many residents lack the means to afford professional rebuilding. As a volunteer for one of these organizations, I found out first-hand how desperate many people are for assistance and, for all the genuine humanitarian feeling animating the private relief efforts, how ineffective decentralized and essentially amateur reconstruction efforts can be.

The “free market” model of disaster relief

Mississippi’s Gulf Coast is supposed to be rebuilt through the “workings of the free market” and relief organizations. Most of the latter are “faith-based” (associated with one or another religious denomination) and use the labor of student and middle-aged adult volunteers. Usually the groups of 20 come only for a week, which means that personnel on worksites is continually changing.

I volunteered for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, which had constructed a camp to house its work groups on the edge of a farm near Gautier, Mississippi—toward the eastern end of the state’s coastline. The camp itself appeared well funded and supplied, with plastic, air-conditioned “pods” as housing;

decent showers, toilets and dining areas; and a large stock of most of the tools one might need. Additionally, there was money for advertising and gimmicks like large printed signs, lanyards and T-shirts.



Presbyterian Disaster Assistance camp

The camp's location had little to do with the location of the worksites; sometimes we traveled 15 miles to go work on a particular house. It appeared that there was not even a plan to divide up the regions in which the different relief organizations were to operate. Instead, our group split into three to go and work on houses in quite different areas.

The situation of the homeowners was an indictment of the profit system. All three I eventually worked for came to the PDA for help because they could not afford to pay for the necessary repairs themselves. All three had to compromise on the quality and extent of the work due to insufficient funds; at least two had been waiting for months for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) loans.

The greatest compromise is made through the use of volunteer labor. Most of the volunteer workers for the faith-based agencies are university students or those who can afford to take a week off work. These students and professionals usually have little knowledge or experience of skilled construction trades. The tens of thousands of hurricane-affected residents who don't have the money to hire professionals to rebuild their homes are obliged to rely on these willing, but unskilled volunteers!

Our team, for instance, was assigned tasks such as tiling, roofing and siding installation, although *none of us* had any prior experience in these trades. In each case, we first stopped at a hardware store, bought how-to booklets and then tried to learn something about the work during the car ride to the respective homes. The results were entirely predictable.

The volunteer labor's lack of productivity was also astounding. Our group of six worked only 25 hours in seven days.

Six and a half of those hours were spent tiling and grouting the floor of a single medium-sized room. This was only the second of seven flood-damaged rooms that needed retiling; at the pace at which the work was proceeding, it would have taken a month to retiling the rest of the house. Following that, electricity and plumbing will still need to be repaired or restored, and the entire house refurnished. Meanwhile, the family of three lives in a tiny FEMA trailer.

Six additional hours went toward trying to install vinyl siding on another house. The owner could not afford to hire professional installers or even purchase enough materials. We began to work, but soon recognized that the operation should be halted until the siding could be installed correctly.

Sadly, despite our good intentions, we left the house in worse condition than we had found it, as we had taken off the trim on the old siding. PDA denied financial aid for purchase of the materials needed to the job properly, on the grounds that it was not hurricane-related damage. Given that the owner had been waiting for two months for a FEMA loan, the replacement of his siding has now been delayed indefinitely.

At another house, we spent 12 hours fixing a leaking roof and making small repairs to the walls. The leak was from a roof rebuilt by volunteers only a month previously! Again, because of insufficient funds and inadequate skills, the job had been done improperly. Rather than replacing a large number of rotting and poorly constructed roof joists, new shingles had simply been applied over the top. The result was obvious: the shingles looked nice and new, but they came in waves. Some sections of the roof would sink a foot if stepped on.

Because of the unevenness of the shingles, pools of water formed after heavy rains and eventually produced leaks. Trying to fix one of these leaks, our group removed a section of the roof, throwing out perhaps 50 brand-new shingles, and then replaced it. Undoubtedly, other leaks will occur; probably all we did was shift around the area where leaks will occur.



The problem roof

Meanwhile, a side wall of the house had at least six different exteriors to it, due to patching. A support beam was so rotten that it was accidentally kicked out. The entire side of the house needed to be rebuilt, but again, because the owner lacked funds, it was not possible. Arguing this was not hurricane damage, PDA denied funds, except to buy expandable foam to fill the holes.

To sum up, for those along the Gulf Coast who had their property damaged or destroyed, there are two options: pay a private contractor or rely on charity. Neither the federal nor the state government will lift a finger. And relief does not come quickly: one year later, some houses haven't been touched, while others are stalled waiting on funding. Public assistance only comes in the form of FEMA trailers and paltry, unfulfilled FEMA loans. Many, many people have been left without any means of properly rebuilding their homes, as they lack the resources to do anything except rely on volunteer labor.

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