
Miss. Looks at Post-Katrina Rebuilding

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September 26, 2005, 3:14 PM EDT

JACKSON, Miss. -- A month after Hurricane Katrina smashed fishermen's shacks, casinos and historic mansions alike, civic leaders in Mississippi are turning their attention to rebuilding, and are wondering this: Will the coast be restored in all its variety? Or will it give way to strip malls and walls of high-rise condos?

The disaster represents an opportunity for big developers. For one thing, many homeowners and small-business owners may decide to sell out rather than rebuild. Also, Katrina flattened entire neighborhoods instead of, say, a house here and a house there, meaning big developers could have a blank canvas on which to work.

Even before Katrina, proposed condo developments prompted heated debate among locals who worried concrete towers would block beach views and rob the coast of its charm and variety.

"I hope we can preserve the historical ambiance that the beach in Mississippi has possessed over the years and not let it look like every other coastline in America," said former Gov. William Winter, longtime president of the state's archives and history board.

Gov. Haley Barbour has appointed a commission, headed by former Netscape chief executive Jim Barksdale of Jackson, to shape the coast redevelopment discussion.

David Stockman, director of real estate for Florida-based Davis Co., said Biloxi was a prime spot for development before the storm and is even more so now. His company is building four 22-story condo towers that were in the works before Katrina.

"Now that the storm has passed and rebuilding will restart, the future is even brighter for Biloxi," Stockman said. "Any of us that are in the market place now are looking for more opportunities."

While many people oppose the high-rises, he sees them as bringing money into the community. In any case, he said, local planners will probably try to achieve a mix of projects -- including badly needed affordable housing for the relatively low-paid public employees and hotel and casino workers -- and may even try to re-create the classic Southern architecture lost to Katrina.

Mississippi's 80-mile coastline has been the home of fishing hamlets; arts communities; miles and miles of manmade white-sand beaches; a bustling harbor in Gulfport; a shrimp industry in and around Biloxi; and, since the early 1990s, neon-lit casinos -- 13 of them in all, including one that was set to open this month.

Katrina smashed businesses large and small Aug. 29. Early estimates show that the hurricane also destroyed or severely damaged two out of three homes along the Mississippi coast -- trailers, middle-class brick houses, tin-roofed fishermen's cottages, concrete condominiums, vacation bungalows and century-old mansions.

"Whatever it will be, it won't be what it was," said Charles L. Sullivan, who has written histories of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and of hurricanes. He said Katrina wiped away much of the region's architectural character, including many of its antebellum mansions.

Construction company executives said serious efforts to start rebuilding homes and smaller businesses could be weeks or even months away, partly because of disputes over insurance coverage.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency also has to reset flood lines, and local governments could set stricter building codes in areas that were previously thought to be safe from flooding.

"We're talking probably two to three years before we've even got a handle on the situation," said homebuilder Duncan Noble Jr. of Gautier.

It is clear most of the casinos will rebuild. They are crucial to the state's economy, employing 14,000 and generating \$73 million this past year for state coffers.

There is still a question, though, of whether they will be allowed to build on land. State law allows casinos to be built only over navigable waters of the Mississippi River or the Gulf of Mexico. Legislators are considering changing the law.

"If they decide to allow the casinos on land, which from a public safety standpoint would make more sense, then instead of having beautiful mansions looking out at floating casinos, you'll just have casinos," said Robert Deyle, a professor of urban and regional planning at Florida State University.

Government officials also want large employers back on their feet soon to prevent the work force from scattering. South Mississippi is home to a sprawling NASA center that tests space-shuttle engines and the state's largest private employer, Northrop Grumman Ship Systems, where about 12,000 welders, pipefitters and electricians make Navy ships.

While big industry has the wherewithal to go on -- the shipyard this week is restoring full operations -- some smaller businesses are not so sure.

Gerald Fayard had hoped to sell his business and retire soon, until Katrina changed his plans. The storm flattened his Gulfport mill, which manufactures woodwork and trim.

Fayard, 58, wants to rebuild -- if he can find the money -- and then work a few more years. He had no insurance and is counting on a Small Business Administration loan.

"You've got to run or rebuild," he said as friends helped him clear debris. "You can't just sit on the porch."

Mary Levens, 69, owns a small commercial building in Gulfport where she runs a mother-daughter accounting business. A tree fell on the building during Katrina, and now the baking sun shines through the rafters onto the mahogany floors.

She worries a proliferation of condominiums will change the character of the area and hopes instead that the recovery will be more like the aftermath of Hurricane Camille, which cut a narrower swath through the area in 1969.

"We came back after Camille -- which was 36 years ago -- bigger and better. We built better and bigger and nicer," she said.

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Associated Press writer Vicki Smith in Gulfport contributed to this report.

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