

When philanthropy steps in the trenches

A reporter's look at the Living Cities Gulf Coast Initiative in Mississippi

By David Tortorano
October 2006

Copyright © 2006 Living Cities

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the prior written permission of Living Cities. Permission is granted to quote from this publication with proper credit.

Katrina's aftermath: One year later

When philanthropy steps in the trenches

Living Cities' Gulf Coast Initiative – a first in some ways – is showing Gulfport how to build a city government that works and may help divert Biloxi from a post-Katrina pattern of rebuilding without a vision...

By DAVID TORTORANO

It was a telling moment at the October 2005 design charrette.

More than 150 new urbanists had converged on Biloxi's Isle of Capri Casino for an intense, six-day brainstorming to come up with new designs for 11 cities that had been pounded by Hurricane Katrina six weeks earlier.

As they were wrapping up their designs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency issued its new flood elevation advisory maps. The worst fears of the designers were realized when they found that virtually everything they had done would have to be elevated, some buildings as much as 20 feet or more. Some designers put together alternate drawings, others simply moved forward hoping the maps would not stand.

The designers, in effect, decided to punt.

That disparity between the "look" created by the designers and the realities of living in a

low-lying coastal area prone to monster surges due to its shallow water is at the heart of the rebuilding dilemma that persists to this day.

The designers who came to South Mississippi to lend a hand were given the task of coming up with the best, utilizing the latest in new urban thinking and taking into consideration the wishes of residents for how they wanted their towns to "look." They focused on the future and what could be.

But outside the Isle of Capri Casino, one of the few waterfront buildings left standing in the wake of the hurricane, residents were still in a daze, more concerned with salvaging what they could from the places they once called home, getting a FEMA trailer, dealing with insurance companies, finding food and water and returning to their jobs. They were focused on today and the immediate tomorrow.

Key dynamic

What has from the start been the key dynamic in the rebuilding involves two often opposing drives. On the one hand there's the desire to plan a community that's better than what was washed away. It's a time-consuming process where a premium is placed on deliberate steps that take into consideration how everything "fits." On the other hand there's the need of people rich and poor and businesses big and small to return to normal by rebuilding homes and re-establishing income sources. The premium is placed on immedi-

acy.

It's in the middle of these forces that Living Cities inserted itself with its Gulf Coast Initiative, a plan to help two key cities on the Mississippi Coast rebuild in the wake of the nation's most devastating natural disaster.

Indeed, if some of the best ideas from the October charrette reach fruition in Gulfport and Biloxi – and some of the least realistic are abandoned – it may be in no small measure due to the work of Living Cities and its consultants. They attempted to put a priority on a realistic approach to what's possible and impossible, based on their experience funding projects that helped revitalize some of the nation's urban centers.

That's not to say the work has been without controversy. In Biloxi, some, like the Vietnamese community, felt they were left out of the planning process. Others that represent minorities have also been critical of the plan for, as they see it, the displacement of the poor and seniors from their homes. Some Biloxi city council members still see portions of the plan as unrealistic, and even supporters admit portions of the plan likely will never occur. Even so, a spokeswoman for the Vietnamese group considers a worst case scenario to be development without a plan.

The timing

Living Cities came in to provide direct help to Biloxi and Gulfport at a time when it appeared the considerable work done during the charrette would be for naught. For Biloxi, Living Cities consultants helped come up with a plan of action that took into consideration the new height requirements, and for Gulfport Living Cities consultants provided some help getting city leaders to work as a team.

In both cases, it was a targeted approach designed for the specific needs of each city.

The effort by Living Cities in Biloxi marks the first time the organization has acted directly in its own name in a community, while

“... that's exactly the kind of assistance local governments are going to need.”

*- Gavin Smith
Office of Recovery and Renewal*

the work in Gulfport was the first time Living Cities delved into civic capability building – something more akin to nation-building.

This in-the-trenches approach may become signature works for Living Cities if both communities end up with plans that help them move forward. But that's hardly a given. And questions remain about money and manpower.

But even with those looming questions, the work has been pivotal.

Gavin Smith, who heads the Governor's Office of Recovery and Renewal, said the type of work being done by Living Cities represents precisely what's needed at this point in the recovery process.

“From what I can tell and knowing some of those involved, that's exactly the kind of assistance local governments are going to need,” said Smith. He said that in a disaster of this magnitude, locals are overwhelmed and don't have the people to do any meaningful planning or long-term implementation.

“If Living Cities is doing those kinds of things, no doubt they're playing a vital role, one typically not provided by the state or FEMA,” Smith said.

The context

It was clear after Katrina that rebuilding South Mississippi would be a monumental task involving billions of dollars to replace much of the infrastructure and rebuild

homes, businesses and confidence. Much of the infrastructure, from homes to businesses to roads and public buildings, were washed away by the hurricane. Thousands, rich and poor alike, were displaced.

In early September Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour created the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal to devise a plan. Philanthropist Jim Barksdale, former CEO of Netscape and a Mississippi native, agreed to chair the effort funded by Barksdale and the Knight Foundation. It held its first meeting Sept. 20. The result was creation of 11 committees to look at specific issues, from transportation to infrastructure.

What gained the most attention came under the infrastructure committee, which brought in internationally known new urbanist Andres Duany of Miami to head a team that would redesign 11 communities. Acting on behalf of the Congress for New Urbanism, Duany gathered more than 100 architects, planners, transportation and building code specialists from across the nation to take on the task.

The team, which included local architects and planners, met Oct. 12-17 at the Mississippi Renewal Forum for a brainstorming session at the Isle of Capri in Biloxi, within shouting distance of the rubble of historic East Biloxi. The team knew it was a chance to help battered Mississippi while at the same time showcase their work on a national stage.

The charrette had barely begun when participants launched out in 11 different teams to see first-hand the diverse towns — artsy Bay St. Louis, the port city of Gulfport, the seaside towns of Long Beach and Pass Christian and industrialized Moss Point and Pascagoula. They talked to residents they could find to learn about what they loved about their hometowns, looked at the architectural styles and searched out old photos to capture the essence and sense of place.

At the end of the forum, the plans were presented to the public in a one-day unveiling. That was followed by multiple town

Biloxi adopts resolution

At the urging of residents who called, sent e-mails and turned out for a meeting, the Biloxi City Council adopted in principal the Reviving the Renaissance recovery plan.

The vote was unanimous.

The council will use the plan as a tool to guide long-term recovery from Hurricane Katrina and assist in securing financial aid. Any recommendations in the plan that vary from current city regulations or laws would have to be approved individually by the council.

With a plan in place, Biloxi is positioned now to snare its share of \$300 million in federal funds earmarked for 49 counties damaged by Katrina.

At the meeting, however, some East Biloxi residents still expressed concerns over the amount of acreage for casinos. They also said too little consideration was given for housing and small businesses that have traditionally operated in East Biloxi. (Source: The Sun Herald, Sept. 29, 2006)

meetings and follow-up charrettes in all the communities. What they came up was quite remarkable: Under this vision, there would be a unified South Mississippi, where 11 different "new urban" communities, some with casinos, some with condos, would be linked by biking and hiking trails, scenic boulevards and trolleys. All this would be connected to neighboring states with a high-speed rail.

Residents who were able to attend the public sessions by and large seemed supportive if still skeptical that it could ever come to fruition. Small wonder since many were still living in FEMA trailers and their first priority was some semblance of normal. And normal seemed a long way off: there were questions about what type of buildings would be allowed, questions about insurance money and more. For them, plans for the future had to take a back seat to the present. What's more,

The pre-Katrina hot spot

The dynamics at work in South Mississippi today can best be understood by recognizing that before the hurricane the Mississippi Coast was already changing. By the summer of 2005 it was a hot spot for development.

Casinos were established and more were coming, and condo developers were viewing South Mississippi as a new frontier where coastal land was still a bargain. The interest went beyond casinos and condos; defense contractors liked the low cost and quality workforce. Northrop Grumman picked South Mississippi for an unmanned aerial vehicle center, where portions of the next generation of Global Hawks and Fire Scouts will be built. Rolls-Royce opted to test jet engines in South Mississippi. But the condo boom best illustrated the interest.

Condo developers who believed Northwest Florida and coastal South Alabama had become too expensive found in Mississippi beach communities that to a large extent were still working class and affordable. They also liked the proximity to a hot casino market. A few months before Katrina, the Sun Herald found there were 65 condo projects approved or on the table, creating 11,500 units valued at \$4.8 billion in the three coastal counties.

Those who feared wall-to-wall condos were told that there were only a limited number of places condos could go, in part because of long-established communities, in part because well-to-do waterfront property owners had neither the interest nor the need to sell. Still, Mississippi Development Authority head Leland Speed was concerned enough to urge South Mississippi officials to consider ways to coordinate planning, lest the area become a hodgepodge. Some liked the idea, but others feared it would send an anti-growth message.

It was in this development hotspot that Hurricane Katrina brought her wrath. While the hurricane altered the landscape, it did not wipe away the interest of developers. Katrina swept away many of the high-priced beach homes and established businesses and uprooted old communities. And while it's not exactly a clean slate, it's true that more land — albeit priced higher than before — is available.

for those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, the designs were just the pretty visions of the well-to-do. For them, there was a big difference between what new urbanists considered affordable and what they considered affordable.¹

In any case, all those forum-generated plans, along with the findings of the 10 other committees, were incorporated into a 200-page report called "After Katrina: Building Back Better than Ever." The report had close to 240 rebuilding recommendations and suggested actions. Remarkably, this was just four months after the hurricane.

But attractive plans and reality were already clashing.

Biloxi goes its own way

If there is one city that could be considered

pivotal to the plans developed at the charrette, it's Biloxi, in part because of name-recognition, in part because of its location, in part because it's a key engine of the region's economy. And it took little time to become clear that Biloxi was going to rebuild, plan or no plan; hardly a surprise given Biloxi's history before the storm.

For Biloxi, the past decade has been the most prosperous in the city's 300-year history, with some \$6 billion in investments. It was a glitzy, bling-bling city not bashful about its somewhat-seedy past. The 1990s had brought casinos, big-name acts and major revenues that allowed the city to pour tens of millions into schools and housing. After Katrina the urge to put it back together and not lose momentum was natural.

The city early on backed an effort to

Camille

It was 36 years ago that Hurricane Camille pounded South Mississippi. After that natural disaster a commission came up with a long list of recommendations. But few if any came to fruition. It has often been said, in particular by Gov. Haley Barbour, that Camille killed more people in 2005 than it did in 1969. The underlying message: too many lessons were not learned.

change state law so casinos could build on shore, and once that was done the projects began rolling in. At the same time, the condo boom that had begun before the hurricane picked up where it left off. And now there was a chance additional lands would be available.

While the big-ticket projects came out of the chute, home rebuilding was creeping along. But it was, in fact, beginning. Biloxi City Councilman Bill Stallworth organized the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center Community Planning Process to help residents rebuild before more strict rules could be passed. Volunteers by early September had completed a couple hundred homes with 100 more under construction.

And the plans developed at the charrette?

"Quite honestly, I wasn't too impressed with the charrette and new urbanism," said Biloxi Mayor A.J. Holloway. He said that what they came up with in October and the weeks after was unrealistic and pricey. Besides, he had more immediate matters to face.

"My first priority was to get this place cleaned up as quickly as possible. Get this debris out of here. The next thing for me was to get gaming legalized on shore," he said. And getting people back home was also crucial. He said housing had been an issue before the hurricane, and now it was more pressing.

"A lot of people with the commission kept saying we're starting with a clean slate. We're not starting with a clean slate. People still live

here and own the property. I believe in property rights – a person can do what they want with their land. A lot of these folks involved were people from the outside, and the governor said time and again this is just ideas and the communities can make their own decisions," Holloway said.²

Clark Griffith, a retired lieutenant general, had participated in the Mississippi Renewal Forum and liked what they did, in part because it gave the community something to think about other than the devastation. But he had concerns.

"There were certain things that just weren't right for Biloxi," including the plan to lower the elevation of Interstate 110. And then there was the planners' resistance to elevating structures. He said it was clear to him adopting the new height requirements was "inevitable" and "to do anything less would be a disservice."

Griffith said that over time, nearly everyone found parts of the plan they didn't like.

The gap between the new urbanist vision and reality appeared to be widening.

The intervention

Ricky Mathews, publisher of the Sun Herald, was concerned with Biloxi's rapid moves.

Mathews had a unique perspective through the many hats he was wearing. In addition to publishing the largest paper in South Mississippi, he was a vice chairman of the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal and chairman of the local arm of the Knight Foundation – a major contributor to the recovery of South Mississippi.

He spent hours at the October forum and was impressed with their work. One thing he came to believe was that building without some type of plan – including a consistent set of codes – would be a mistake.

Mathews was alarmed when it appeared Biloxi was poised to adopt new density rules. To him that meant hard-hit East Biloxi "could end up with significant commercial

development around the periphery of the peninsula and the center of the peninsula would rebuild in some sort of unplanned way – if at all. That would have been a disaster in terms of rebuilding a city that has any chance of recapturing its sense of place.”

Mathews a few months earlier had met with representatives from Living Cities, a group that advocates and invests in the revitalization of the nation’s inner cities. They had stopped by during a visit and asked if there was something they could do to help South Mississippi.

“It seemed everyone wanted to help us at that point,” said Mathews.

He did some research, found out about the projects Living Cities had done elsewhere and came to the conclusion that the organization could be important to the rebuilding. But back then, the question was precisely what role would Living Cities play? Mathews said he made it his mission to find a way.

“I talked to Reese (Fayde, CEO of Living Cities) and others over the course of the next few days and weeks. Ultimately, as I was watching the Biloxi situation unfold, I asked Mayor A.J. Holloway if I could put together a meeting of several of the folks involved in the Biloxi planning part of the Mississippi Renewal Forum and Living Cities,” he said.

Holloway had never heard of Living Cities, but agreed to a meeting organized by Mathews. Holloway said there was no commitment at the first meeting, but by February he agreed they should work together on a plan for Biloxi.

Mathews at the same time maneuvered to get Living Cities involved with Gulfport, the largest city on the Mississippi coast and one that, arguably, was also a linchpin. That city’s mayor, Brent Warr, was already acquainted with Living Cities. He met Fayde in Charleston, S.C., not long after the hurricane at a design program.

Several discussions followed, and by mid-March it was a done deal.

In with both feet

When Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Knight Foundation took little time to respond, sending in \$1 million for emergency relief to the Knight community of Biloxi.

Just a week after the hurricane, Knight President Alberto Ibarguen and Vice President Mike Maidenberg went in to see for themselves the extent of the destruction. Since then, Knight Foundation has worked to help the Mississippi Gulf Coast set its sights on the future.

“The destruction was total, 70 miles of coastline wiped out ... from several blocks from the Gulf to half a mile ... and flooding several miles inland,” said Beverly Blake, Knight’s program director for Biloxi.

The Knight Foundation and Netscape founder Jim Barksdale contributed \$1 million each to fund 11 public design forums on the Gulf Coast, attended by thousands of Mississippians and a national and local army of planners and engineers.

The Knight Foundation’s work in Biloxi is continuing.

In the trenches

Founded in 1991 as the National Community Development Initiative, Living Cities is a hybrid group of philanthropic, corporate and government investors that promote the revitalization of the nation’s urban centers. It’s known for its support of work in America’s old central city neighborhoods, and has been a funding source for 300 community development corporations in 23 cities, from New York to Seattle and Chicago to Miami.

South Mississippi represented a different set of challenges.

Fayde early on was interested in doing something to help the hurricane-battered Gulf Coast. She knew the Knight Foundation, a Living Cities member, was involved in the work in Mississippi, and told foundation president Alberto Ibarguen that if there was a way the resources of Living Cities could help,

Devil in the detail

If there is one issue that has continued to be a problem, it's what will happen to the poor and lower income in East Biloxi. The plans drawn up for East Biloxi added to the concern because of a proposal to convert flood-prone areas into a park.

The fact of the matter is this: The East Biloxi neighborhood where the poor live is low lying and prone to damage from future hurricanes.

The *saints* says vacate it, don't put people in harms way. But if they don't vacate, make them protect themselves by elevating homes or only allow high rises and other big-ticket buildings that can afford to let lower floors take a bath.

The *gut* says let 'em back, you don't displace people, especially the poor and seniors. You don't tell people who have lived for generations in a particular area that they can't return.

The dilemma touches on hot button issues of the American psyche: the rights of individuals and property owners versus the government's inclination to protect citizens. It's the government-as-nanny issue: smoking, seat belts, helmets. It's the right of individuals to be stupid if they want to: smoking, seat belts, helmets.

Seen another way, the issue in East Biloxi is big business versus the little man. No matter the science, no matter how pure the motivation, it goes against the grain to tell mom and pop to move out and let a deep-pocket developer move in.

East Biloxi is the epitome of all the contradictions.

to let her know.

The Knight Foundation has a history of jumping in with both feet. Within a few days of the hurricane the foundation had people on the ground in Mississippi. They told Fayde any resources she could provide would be appreciated. In late October she visited New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. She could see the need was huge and locals were overwhelmed.

"You can not, not be moved," said Fayde about the devastation she saw.

She felt a need, perhaps a duty, to put Living Cities experience to use. She recalled something that crossed her mind during one of the meetings on the Mississippi Coast.

"We (Living Cities) kind of are old hands at this, saying we know how to do planning in complicated situations, community development work ... If that's what you've spent your life thinking that you are doing, here you are standing in the middle of a place that is screaming 'need' ... In that situation, if I can't make what I've done be useful, I almost have to question its usefulness ever."

What Living Cities would do developed over time.

In Gulfport, Living Cities made a grant to provide a consultant – Marvin Siflinger – who would work directly with Warr for a limited time. What makes the work in Gulfport stand out is the type of help the consultant has given: For the first time, Living Cities through the consultant took steps to help build the civic capacity of a city. The idea was to help Gulfport work more efficiently, more professionally.

In Biloxi, consultant Gordon Brigham was assigned to work directly with the mayor to provide whatever assistance was needed. It soon became clear there would be some advantages doing the work under the name of Living Cities – a first for the organization. Living Cities would tackle East Biloxi and come up with a plan for the two-square-mile, old, ethnic neighborhood. Living Cities would become part of the planning process.

Biloxi: Getting a plan

Living Cities could not have picked a

The tough decisions

Local officials now trying to figure out what to do with residents from East Biloxi who were displaced by floodwaters are not the first to face this type of question. Another Knight Foundation community, Grand Forks, N.D., faced the same issues in the wake of the 1997 flood that inundated 80 percent of the town.

After the flood, local officials refused to issue rebuilding permits in floodprone areas. They opted to buy out residents to make way for a massive new dike system that would prevent future flooding in the town.¹

The area between the Red River and Red Lake River became The Greenway, a 2,200-acre area that includes major portions of two communities that used to sit in the flood plain. The Greenway provides a system of trails, festival grounds, nature preserves, picnic areas, and a campground, and hosts several events throughout the year.²

Politicians were roundly praised for making the tough decisions that would help provide future safety. But constituents were none too happy. In post-disaster elections the voters turned out the mayor and most of the city council.³

¹ What will New Orleans look like five years from now? Martha Carr and Jeffrey Meitrodt, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Dec. 25, 2005.

² Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Greenway_%28Greater_Grand_Forks%29)

³ Carr, *ibid.*

tougher nut to crack.

East Biloxi is a low-lying area where some of the poorest residents, many of them renters, have gathered for years, and it was heavily damaged by Katrina. It was the epitome of all the problems associated with rebuilding, where the competing forces converged.

It has long-time residents, a large proportion minorities, many of whom wanted to return; the deep-pocket casino developers who were excited over the possibilities that opened up with land-based operations; well-financed condo developers; and it is ground zero for new urbanists. It also was an area prone to damage from hurricanes.

It was in this environment that Living Cities came on board.

And indication of just how controversial the rebuilding of East Biloxi will be came when new urbanists Elizabeth Moule and Stefanos Polyzoides of Pasadena, Calif., key players in the Duany team who had remained to work closely with Biloxi, opted to bail out. They said they could not support Biloxi's de-

cision to accept the FEMA guidelines, and also claimed reconstruction would be influenced by casino and condo developers.³

Griffith, who disputes any undue influence of developers, said Moule and Polyzoides pulled out of the process after city officials decided to consult with Living Cities. He said the city offered to include Moule and Polyzoides, but the firm chose to withdraw.

Even with the withdrawal of Moule and Polyzoides, there are plenty of interests with dogs in the hunt. And at times it seems like a no-win situation. Allow people to rebuild without considering future storms and you've potentially put lives at risk; force people to rebuild to higher elevations and you've made the community ugly; let deep-pocket developers put up structures that are more storm resistant and you've displaced the poor. The devil, in this case, is truly in the details.

For a while it appeared that Biloxi was going to develop without any type of overall plan. But that changed when Holloway agreed to the help offered by Living Cities.

Around the same time, Holloway announced formation of the Reviving the Renaissance Committee and chose Griffith to head the effort. It included about 200 volunteers.

Insiders had some concern that this might mean a duplication of effort, but they managed to divide the work in a way that "fit." Living Cities would focus on East Biloxi and the renaissance group the entire city. Holloway credits Brigham with helping mesh the work.

For his part, Griffith said the two groups worked well together.

"I think they complement each other. They duplicate one another in certain areas, which is understandable, especially in the affordable housing," Griffith said. "We don't disagree on anything between the two reports ... just some differences in opinion in how you get things done."

Griffith was particularly happy with the expertise Living Cities brought to the table.

"I think they added a lot to the process with their expertise of the architectural side and the experience that they've had in other cities," said Griffith. "They brought that expertise here and applied it to our situation."

Being a military man, he couldn't help but make a military analogy.

"It's just like a military campaign. If you have a specific area you need to address, you get the special forces," he said. That was the case for East Biloxi.

Griffith said that while Living Cities is part of the new urbanist group, "they don't drink the holy water five times a day. I think they only drink it two times a day," Griffith said. "They were just more realistic."

The report

The renaissance committee and Living Cities came up with two separate reports that were eventually combined into one to chart the course for future growth in both East Biloxi and the broader city. Among other things, it calls for a casino and entertainment

"It's just like a military campaign. If you have a specific area you need to address, you get the special forces."

- Clark Griffith

Reviving the Renaissance Committee

district along the waterfront, a central park in a low-lying area and multi- and single-family housing on higher ground.

The report says Biloxi has two of the three ingredients needed to cultivate major economic development: strong investment and a predictable customer base. But the missing piece is an expanded and diverse workforce that need homes they can afford.

To accommodate the workforce, the land use planning framework anticipates a total of 5,500 housing units, up from 3,500 units before the storm, including single-family houses, townhouses and multifamily units. New, lower-density housing would be incorporated into the existing neighborhoods on less flood-prone higher ground.

Underlying all of this is a land use approach that lessens the potential for future flooding, in part by compensating homeowners who are faced with leaving flood-prone areas.

Biloxi City Councilman Mike Fitzpatrick didn't like what he saw in the plan.

"I've read their reports, and they do good work ... my only problem is, to me, it's a lot of pipe dreams," he said. That's the same problem he had with the planning done during the October forum.

One of his problems, according to Fitzpatrick, is with the central park.

The Biloxi team

At the invitation of Mayor Holloway, Living Cities assembled an interdisciplinary team of more than a dozen people with the range of skills needed to tackle the complex situation in East Biloxi.

Consultant Gordon Brigham put together a team of nationally known experts.

The technical work was led by Goody Clancy Associates of Boston, a firm nationally recognized for its work in neighborhood revitalization.

Other important disciplines represented included analysis of general market conditions and gaming/entertainment industry potential, transportation planning and traffic engineering, affordable housing and neighborhood development, and human services and community capacity building.

"The only way is to buy the land, and that will cost you a fortune," he said.

Councilman George Lawrence feels much of it is not feasible. He said people like their yards and cutting grass. They don't want to live in condos or apartments or in homes elevated too high. Like Fitzpatrick, he thinks the central park is too costly.

"They all got scared when the plans came out," he said about residents. When you try to explain they are just concepts, that doesn't mean a thing if you're living there or your parents are living there and they're concerned about what it will mean for them.

"I'm not one of those visionary guys ... whether a plan needs to be in place, I don't know," Lawrence said. "What bothers me, how can we do this for people who paid their dues already?"

Uyen Le of the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies said the plan did not take into consideration the concerns of the Vietnamese community, a heavy proportion of which live in the area where the plan proposes a park.

Griffith is not that surprised over complaints. He said there are some people who will be dissatisfied no matter what is proposed. He said you could be handing out free hundred-dollar bills and there will always be those who complain and say theirs is dirty or wrinkled. And he can understand the feeling.

"They want badly to go back to living where they did," Griffith said.

Complaints aside, the report released in July did give residents something to go on. A story in the Aug. 22 edition of the Sun Herald, which said East Biloxians are "tired of waiting," said they might not like everything about the plans, but it gave them something concrete to get a sense of what might happen to their neighborhoods.⁴

Indeed, Le said a worst-case scenario is proceeding without a plan.

Gulfport: Back to the basics

It's indicative of just how basic the work by Living Cities in Gulfport has been. During each council meeting, a consultant attends and takes copious notes about how they interact, how they get along, then talks to them later about it. It has been an issue in the past, and continues to this day.

Gulfport over the years has become the commercial and transportation hub for the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Much younger but larger than Biloxi to its east, Gulfport is home to the state's seaport and international airport, and hosts a sizeable shipbuilding infrastructure.

Gulfport is more button-down and conservative than Biloxi, and has opted for only a limited casino presence. Indeed, the mayor initially opposed any move to allow casinos north of U.S. 90.

As in Biloxi, the real world was intruding on the planning process.

But in the case of Gulfport, the problem was that the city government simply didn't work. As one observer put it, "they fought like cats and dogs," while another called the

environment a "war zone." The highly publicized conflicts gave the general impression that the city was paralyzed and not pulling together.

It has a neophyte mayor, elected just nine weeks before the hurricane hit, and a city council that has six newcomers and just one incumbent. Getting along seems impossible, let alone getting anything done. The Sun Herald noted that in post-Katrina days, many city leaders described a serious communication breakdown between the mayor and city council.⁵

Using a sports analogy, Gulfport had a group of talented athletes, all determined to win. The problem was, they were not reading from the same play book, didn't know the signals or the patterns. Worst still, some of the athletes were bringing obstacles onto the field that the other team members had to hurdle.

Gulfport's mayor had, in fact, embraced the plans drawn up at the October charrette. He had encouraged developers at a meeting immediately after the charrette to embrace it as well, and noted Gulfport could have one of the finest cities in the nation as a result. Warr had in his mind some sense of where the city should head, based on the charrette. But getting there, given the circumstances, was quite another matter.

It was in this situation that Living Cities invited itself.

Like nation building

The work in Gulfport that's being done by Living Cities and its consultants is far more basic than the work that's being done in Biloxi. It may be no stretch to say that the effort in Gulfport has more in common with elements of nation building than inner city revitalization.

Warr said he met with Living Cities consultant Marvin Siflinger, who provided his thoughts on ways the group might be able to help. Part of what appealed to Warr had

nothing to do with the message, but with the delivery.

"He was very respectful and it was appreciated," said Warr.

The most crucial initial need was for someone to take a fresh look at the decision-making process. What followed were intensive discussions with a host of city officials and department heads. What became clear was a lack of coordination and lack of a strategic plan.

"We needed a Management by Objectives infusion," said Warr, referring to a business practice that involves management and employees agreeing on goals and methods to achieve them.

What struck Warr was the similarity between MBO and what he had envisioned he would be able to do as mayor of Gulfport. He said he did something akin to MBO as a businessman, and did the same with the chamber of commerce. It's something he had campaigned on, but never knew it was called Management by Objectives or how, in fact, to achieve the goals.

But then again, he never had the training to pull it off.

As a small businessman, Warr was involved in every aspect of the business. But that's quite different from being the CEO of a 700-person organization. He needed to be trained in the decision-making process and learn how to delegate. Warr had no opportunity to get public administration management training, like that provided by the Conference of Mayors. So the consultant took on the task.

Beyond working directly with Warr, Siflinger and consultant Betsy Kourkounis began working with personnel to build a city government that can work as a team. The process included lessons in public management and conflict resolution. The work included some staff changes and, as one observer put it, a lot of "hand-holding."

The consultants worked closely with elected officials and city employees to find a consen-

sus, with an eye towards eventually putting together a mission statement and a needs assessment – what's being done that's consistent and what's not consistent.

Two teams were created, a leadership team and a management team. The leadership team included the mayor, staff and city council and they set the long-range goals. The management team included the mayor and department heads and their task is to carry out the goals.

Living Cities, beginning in late May, launched a series of workshops and intensive planning meetings that did not end until June. In a strategic goal-setting workshop with the leadership team, the question was, what do you want to focus on?

The vision

They decided they wanted a city that's viable economically, one that focuses on education and children, one that's business friendly with neighborhoods people want to live in that reflects their friendly and diverse character. That became part of the vision statement.

Unlike Biloxi, which has a heavy reliance on gaming, Gulfport chose not to place too much emphasis on gambling. They will welcome them, but limit them. There's interest in developing the waterfront area, including some high rises, and significant interest in re-developing the central business district.

The next step was how to get there. That was handled during a July meeting with the directors, in which they determined who was responsible for pulling off the goals. They also developed strategic goals on how to achieve the vision – five-year and annual goals. Those annual goals are the responsibility of department heads.

The results were two things many city officials and residents have said has been lacking in city government recently: agreement and optimism. Barbara Nalley, council president, credits Living Cities with pushing everyone in the right direction.⁶

“...they got some tough questions from a lot of people.”

- Biloxi Mayor A.J. Holloway

“I think they've done real well,” said councilman Jackie P. Smith about the work of the Living Cities consultants. He said the city still has a long way to go. “We've got to get together on our plans ... but the work they've done, it's been great.”

The mayor is encouraged by what has happened.

“I know that it will work,” Warr said. “It's frustrating that it's taken this long to get here. It will build trust within the department heads, City Council and my office.”⁷

By the end of June 2006, the city of Gulfport had a vision for the future that city leaders wrote together and a loose framework to begin working toward that vision, in the form of a mission. They came up with 18 strategic goals, from public safety to rebuilding of infrastructure to recreation and education.

Conclusions

Living Cities got involved in two communities considered linchpins for the recovery of South Mississippi. What happens in Gulfport and Biloxi will go a long way toward establishing the “image” of the South Mississippi recovery.

The ultimate value of the initiative will be determined by issues beyond the control of Living Cities. An ability to follow through will be crucial, but both Biloxi and Gulfport continue to be overburdened with work and lack of funding. For revitalization projects the size and duration of these, it would be appropriate to have a development authority with a

project manager and staff and consultants. It's unclear if that will ever occur.

Even so, it appears the Living Cities initiative played a significant, timely role that's appreciated and recognized by local leaders who were directly involved. If Biloxi ultimately adopts the joint RTR/Living Cities proposal, then Living Cities can take credit for salvaging portions of the considerable design work done during the October charrette.

By the time Living Cities arrived on the scene, Holloway had pretty much dismissed the new urbanist approach. But the work with Living Cities caused a change of heart. He said the difference between the October charrette and Living Cities was "a realistic approach and a realistic price."

Should the proposal for Biloxi be adopted, Living Cities will be able to lay claim to helping divert Biloxi from continuing an early post-Katrina pattern of rebuilding without an accompanying, guiding vision.

Holloway said Living Cities "did good work ... they got some tough questions from a lot of people" and managed to address them with "something they could use."

Living Cities also provided as part of its mission five crucial reports prepared by nationally known experts: one on Biloxi's gaming market potential; a market analysis; an analysis of affordable housing; human services needs; and an east Biloxi transportation assessment.

Mathews thinks the help was "just what the doctor ordered and at just the right time."

"Because of the complexity of the challenge and the extremely difficult decisions that have to be made in East Biloxi, I believe that work will be some of the most important work done in the aftermath of the storm," he said.

"The decisions and solutions there will be groundbreaking and historic and will have implications for not only all areas of South Mississippi and the New Orleans region, but will have implications for the rest of the United States," Mathews said.

*"I needed someone to
kind of jerk the bridle
on me."*

- Gulfport Mayor Brent Warr

In Biloxi, Living Cities tackled one of the stickiest situations. Those who want to return face a particularly bleak scenario: They are in an area prone to flooding, costs have risen and there are still questions about what will and will not be allowed. Living Cities and its consultants will likely be criticized for some portions of the plan.

In Gulfport, Warr credits the Living Cities consultant with snapping the city out of a crisis mode and placing it in an action mode.

"I needed someone to kind of jerk the bridle on me," said Warr. And about the newfound cooperation between the administration and city council, Warr notes it was "purely because of them."

It was during an intensive session in July that they started coming together.

"A lot less would be getting done," said one observer. "Basic civility is crucial."

Holloway would like to see Living Cities remain involved in Biloxi's future.

"We'll continue to work with them," he said.

Like Holloway, Warr hopes the help will continue.

"We've talked and asked them to continue working with us on an ongoing basis," Warr said.

For the time being, Gulfport will have to cope with what appears at this point to be slow progress, in part because rebuilding the mechanism of city government takes time and is to a large extent behind the scenes.

As recently as July 2006, the lack of action

in Gulfport was notable enough to Sun Herald executive editor Stan Tiner that he wrote a column in which he contrasted the lack of activity in Gulfport with the activity in Biloxi.

Tiner noted that Holloway expects to have 18 casinos in Biloxi – five more than before Katrina – bringing thousands of jobs, new hotel rooms and millions in tax revenue. But in Gulfport, “folks are still waiting to hear the big announcement that Warr promises is just ahead – always just ahead.”⁸

It’s likely Tiner’s perception is a widely held belief. But what is happening in Gulfport today is an effort to put the foundation in place for better decision-making tomorrow, and it remains a work in progress. Still, movement is occurring. On Sept. 18, 2006, the city’s only casino – Island View – finally opened.

But there are still severe communications problems. As recently as September, the mayor and city council were at odds over the budget.

Nearly invisible

One of the oddities is that, despite this work, Living Cities remains somewhat invisible to the broader public. While those who have worked directly with Living Cities like what’s been done, those not directly involved are far less familiar with the role the organization has played. Indeed, Holloway, who worked directly with Living Cities in Biloxi, wasn’t aware the group is also working with Gulfport.

A check with some key officials outside the process indicates there’s not a lot of understanding of the role of Living Cities. Harrison County Supervisor Connie Rockco, for instance, said she was not very familiar with Living Cities or its work in South Mississippi. But that’s because she’s focusing on pressing matters elsewhere in the county.

“You’re going to have to bite off your chunk” she said, going to where the need is. And she didn’t feel her help was needed in the two cities where Living Cities was in-

involved.

Well known or not, it appears that, at least in these two cases, Living Cities’ approach of getting down in the trenches might wind up making the difference in the recovery for both cities. Gulfport knew where it wanted to go but didn’t know how to drive, while Biloxi knew how to drive but didn’t know where it was going.

Still, Biloxi and Gulfport are understaffed and dollars are tight, which could impact the ultimate effectiveness of the work done by Living Cities. Staying the course may be difficult for both cities without additional, ongoing help.

¹ Battle for Biloxi, Jim Lewis, New York Times, May 21, 2006.

² Commission offers a menu; Recovery means different thing to each city, Geoff Pender, The Sun Herald, May 7, 2006.

³ Architect firm pulls out of Biloxi, Lora Hines, The Clarion-Ledger, April 6, 2006.

⁴ Biloxians tired of waiting; Residents meet on redevelopment. Anita Lee, The Sun Herald, Aug. 22, 2006.

⁵ Living Cities fostering teamwork, Joshua Norman, The Sun Herald, June 17, 2006.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ A Tale of Two Cities, Stan Tiner, The Sun Herald, June 23, 2006.

About the author

David Tortorano, a native of New York, has 28 years experience as an award-winning reporter and editor on newspapers in Alabama, California, Florida and Mississippi. He is now owner of Tortorano Commissioned Publications, a consulting firm in Gulf Breeze, FL.

He first came to the Gulf Coast in 1984 as Pensacola bureau chief for United Press International. He later worked on newspapers in Fort Walton Beach and Pensacola, FL, and Mobile, AL, before joining the Sun Herald in 2001. He was assistant business editor, covering a range of economic development issues, when Katrina hit. He was on the reporting team that won the 2006 Pulitzer for Public Service.

Tortorano has covered hurricanes and their aftermath since 1985, and as a resident has coped with the same problems as his readers. His home was damaged by Hurricane Ivan in 2004, then nine months later by Hurricane Dennis. He braced for Katrina from the relative safety of Gulf Breeze, but was back in Mississippi reporting the day after Katrina hit.

As with the rest of the newsroom staff, much of his time after that was spent on hurricane-related stories. He covered the Mississippi Renewal Forum from start to finish and continued to track the rebuilding stories until he left the paper in April 2006 to start his consulting firm.

He was engaged by Living Cities in August to write a story about the group's efforts in Gulfport and Biloxi. The assignment was to get a local perspective on the work done by Living Cities and its consultants.

Tortorano spent much of his time getting background and off-the-record comments from about a dozen people familiar and not-so-familiar with the work done by Living Cities in Mississippi. He also interviewed key leaders, inside and outside the circle, for "on the record" comments included in his report.