

The Hurricanes' Legacy

Redevelopment in the Gulf Coast and the Nation

"If you're going to go back and nothing's changed except that we got rid of the water and started rebuilding Bourbon Street and Canal Street, whoop-de-do....If I go back, what job is going to be there for me?...If we could get more policing, if jobs opened up, if the drug situation wasn't totally out of hand, if the murder rate changed, yeah, we'd come back."

Cathy Chandler, displaced resident of New Orleans' 9th Ward
USA Today, 18 September 2005

"The Baton Rouge we live in and grew up in is no longer. These people are here to stay."

Mike Walker, East Baton Rouge Parish Councilman
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 4 September 2005

The tragic aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has presented our nation with the colossal challenge of redeveloping dozens of Gulf Coast communities. Already, experts are engaging in an intense debate about how this redevelopment should occur: How should we rebuild New Orleans and its flooded parishes? How do we provide housing for hundreds of thousands of displaced residents? And how do we design communities in accord with nature, in order to lessen the impact of future disasters?

As the nation rushes money, personnel and other resources to the region, we must not only meet immediate needs, but also seize the opportunity to redevelop communities in ways that are more secure, economically viable, egalitarian, and environmentally sound. We believe this is a vision that our nation can deliver.

It is made all the more possible by the experience and expertise developed in the last several years by the many practitioners and communities that have worked to implement citizen-driven planning that coordinates development, transportation, revitalization of older areas and preservation of open space and the environment. Today, we have a far better grasp of how to grow our towns, suburbs and cities sensibly, while avoiding past mistakes.

With this goal in mind, Smart Growth America offers the following set of principles and recommendations:

Providing Affordable, Accessible Housing

Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the majority of them are poor and in need of affordable housing. After losing their homes, belongings, and livelihoods, evacuees now need affordable homes more than ever.

This crisis calls for both short-term assistance and long-term solutions. In the short-term, we must address the fact that 300,000 housing units were destroyed or damaged by Hurricane Katrina alone, and that 71 percent of those units were considered affordable to low-income renters. In New Orleans, 20 percent of rental units lost were affordable to the city's poorest residents (those earning 30 percent of area median income—\$11,640—or less). Nearly half (47.3 percent) of those who lived in the flooded areas of the metro were renters.

Losing these homes has exacerbated our nation's already severe shortage of low-income housing overnight. A sound redevelopment effort must include a plan to produce adequate numbers of affordable homes, not just in the affected states, but also in the many other communities where they are needed. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly clear that new FEMA and HUD evacuee housing initiatives are falling short in allowing lowest income households to afford safe and decent housing. Additional resources are needed to meet the housing needs for extremely low and very low-income households.

Principle: *Intermediate housing policies should provide low-income individuals and families with maximum flexibility and enough direct rental assistance to help them attain good quality housing wherever they have chosen to relocate.*

In previous emergencies, hurricane evacuees have been housed in huge trailer parks and other makeshift arrangements. But the sheer numbers and the likelihood that “temporary” will become several years make this option untenable. Also, decades of research and experience have taught us that housing low-income people in large concentrations engenders a multitude of problems and perpetuates bleak economic conditions.

Principle: *Intermediate housing and long-term redevelopment policies must avoid the continued or further concentration of poverty.*

Fortunately, innovations in housing policy have enabled both renters and prospective homebuyers to live in communities that aren't uniformly poor and isolated. Many housing officials now recognize that building attractive, mixed-use, and mixed-income residential areas can yield profitable development projects, housing for a wide range of incomes, and better transportation access to jobs and services. For example, the federal HOPE VI program in many cases engaged public-private partnerships to build communities for families of varying incomes, ensuring that poor residents would not be isolated. Unfortunately, such programs were not adequately funded to guard against a net loss of affordable units—a very disappointing outcome for an otherwise exemplary model for building new affordable housing developments.

At the state and local levels, inclusionary housing policies have increased the supply of affordable homes by requiring new developments to include a certain percentage of

below-market-rate units. Affordable housing trust funds also have been effective at the state and regional level. A National Housing Trust Fund was endorsed by former HUD Secretaries Henry Cisneros and Jack Kemp in their report, *Opportunity and Progress: A Bipartisan Platform for National Housing Policy*, and should be enacted to address long-term housing needs.

The President's proposed Urban Homesteading Act could be a positive step, particularly if it results in the reuse and rehabilitation of blighted and vacant federally owned properties, such as HUD foreclosed properties. However, this homeownership program will help only a small fraction of displaced citizens, because "homesteads" would be limited to a small number of lottery winners, and many residents are not willing or able to take on the major responsibilities of homeownership. In addition, some federal "surplus land" may not be suitable for housing development—especially those in environmentally sensitive areas such as coastal wetlands or in fringe areas beyond the reach of public transportation.

Instead of creating lots of untested new initiatives, the federal government should fully fund its existing successful programs, including the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, which should be more deeply targeted to the lowest income households, and the HOME program. Both have proven to be effective tools in community development, homeownership, and other vital needs over many decades. For the Gulf Coast region, these existing efforts could also be better coordinated to ensure the preservation and production of affordable housing across affected metropolitan regions and towns.

Based on these principles and analysis, our coalition supports the following:

- ✦ Most displaced citizens should receive vouchers sufficient to rent housing in a variety of locales—not just in the least-affluent neighborhoods.
- ✦ The federal response must avoid clustering large numbers of low-income evacuees in trailer parks or other temporary camps.
- ✦ The President should designate a central federal housing entity to direct the federal housing response and coordinate the related functions of HUD, FEMA and the IRS. People in crisis should not have to navigate among federal agencies with different rules and processes. This entity should oversee the rebuilding needs of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas and the housing needs of people who have migrated to other states.
- ✦ Every effort should be made to preserve as many HUD-subsidized affordable housing units as is feasible. If such units have been rendered uninhabitable by the hurricanes, they should be replaced with new construction.
- ✦ Existing housing assistance programs like HOME and CDBG must be fully funded, and they should be designed to produce high-quality, mixed-income, and mixed-use communities with enough homes to meet the needs of extremely low-income families. Katrina/Rita funds must be supplemental to existing program funds, and care should be taken not to "raid" existing programs and deprive needy recipients nationwide of scarce funds.

- ✦ Redevelopment efforts should focus on construction on infill sites, brownfields, vacant properties, empty or near-empty shopping centers, and surplus federal lands that are suitable for development.
- ✦ Comprehensive redevelopment plans must ensure that homes for low-income families are located in proximity to jobs, whether in the suburbs or city, and that there are travel options for getting to work, school and services. Housing should incorporate parks and abundant natural open space to provide for recreation, community aesthetics and environmental benefits.

Preserving the Unique Cultural Heritage of the Region

The people in the Gulf Coast Region have suffered a huge loss, not just in human terms, but also in terms of their history and cultural heritage. Community leaders should do all they can to preserve what is left of the region's enormously rich cultural resources, landmarks, and historic buildings. Given the region's dependency on tourism, such efforts are critical in ensuring a viable future. From small businesses on Main Street to stately old schools and civic buildings, these assets also anchor communities with civic pride.

Unfortunately, the hurricanes' destruction has damaged many historic structures, and many are calling for their demolition. Such efforts should be resisted in favor of a major push to rehabilitate and preserve these unique resources. Consequently, we support the following principals:

- ✦ Damage assessments should consider the historic importance of individual structures, and should be conducted by qualified engineers, architects, and others with preservation expertise. Such information should be used to prioritize historic preservation and future livability as goals in comprehensive planning for redevelopment.
- ✦ Redevelopment efforts should build upon the existing value of historic residential neighborhoods, commercial districts, and natural areas to preserve and enhance unique regional characteristics.
- ✦ Authorities should create incentives and organizational mechanisms to facilitate rehabilitation, and all new construction should follow excellent design guidelines.
- ✦ Preserving and reusing historic buildings is sound environmental practice and should be part of any redevelopment strategy.

Protecting Health, Safety, Energy Security, and the Environment

The floodwaters inundating much of metro New Orleans and other flooded areas are teeming with toxins and microorganisms. It is essential for federal and state governments to provide funding and technical assistance to ensure safe, clean drinking water supplies

and sewage facilities, clean up waterways and natural areas, and act immediately to reduce the exposure of people and animals to toxins.

While speed is needed to address these issues, important environmental protections must not be eliminated. The integrity of the soil, air and water will be key elements in the long-term habitability of the region. Given the billions of federal dollars being poured into the reconstruction effort, local leaders must be given the staffing, resources, and tools necessary to ensure that environmental remediation is done right.

At the same time, flexibility in applying environmental standards may be appropriate in areas where contamination is not serious. This is also more feasible in areas where the intended use is industrial or commercial development, both essential sectors for the economic rebirth of the region.

***Principle:** Given the harsh environmental toll in many Gulf Coast communities, now is not the time to eliminate longstanding environmental protections to hasten the redevelopment effort.*

There is little question that the devastation of New Orleans and other coastal communities was intensified by the loss of natural buffer systems such as coastal wetlands, marshes, and barrier beaches that have historically protected against storm events. Such areas have been depleted by poorly planned land development and man-made levees on the Mississippi River and other waterways. Yet such natural barriers can serve as the most effective, least costly and most low-maintenance protection available.

***Principle:** In the rush to redevelop the region, we must avoid building in, and strengthen the protection of areas that form natural barriers against future disasters, and where lives and property would be in perpetual jeopardy.*

The federal government, states, and local communities must strengthen coastal management policies that address development in coastal zones. All relevant levels of government should adopt natural hazard mitigation strategies and coastal wetland restoration policies, such as those outlined in the Louisiana Coastal Area Ecosystem Restoration Plan, and follow the advice of the Association of Floodplain Managers and other hydrology professionals regarding reliance on levees to protect structures and human lives. The federal government should consider a nationwide levee safety program similar to existing dam safety programs.

If certain areas are too dangerous for redevelopment, how can we restrict development and still maintain a comparable level of economically productive land, building stock and infrastructure? For those areas deemed too dangerous for redevelopment, property owners must be fairly compensated for lost development rights. To accomplish this, innovative tools should be used to help affect an equitable shift of settlement to places that need reinvestment or are suitable for accommodating new growth. For example, federal, state, and local funds as well as other sources should be used to acquire land, or transfer or purchase development rights for natural flood protection zones. Those development rights can then be shifted to areas of the metro region where adequate infrastructure, underused land or other factors allow for higher densities and more compact form than currently exist.

***Principle:** Areas deemed too dangerous for habitation should be set aside from future redevelopment, and existing property owners should be fairly compensated for their losses. To make up for the loss of developable land, local leaders should identify areas that are suitable for higher density redevelopment.*

Insurance practices should also be reconsidered. Many homes in the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina are known as repetitive loss structures, that is, structures with repeated flood insurance claims. Federal and private insurance programs should be strengthened to allow for better-planned development.

This might be accomplished through compulsory coverage or risk-based pricing mechanisms that internalize more of the true risks of development. The federal government should consider strengthening its minimum nationwide standards under the National Flood Insurance Program, and communities should review their laws to determine if higher standards are warranted. On a related note, Congress should adequately fund the National Hazard Mitigation Grant Program that promotes the mitigation of hazards to structures, while at the same time requiring rigorous cost benefit analysis to ensure that the benefits of mitigation exceed the costs.

***Principle:** The federal government and local jurisdictions should consider ways to have flood insurance reflect the real risks of building in flood prone areas.*

A large percentage of U.S. production and refining capacity is situated in the Gulf of Mexico. The economy of the Gulf Coast depends upon this energy production as well as on coastal port facilities. The economy of the United States is also heavily tied to Gulf Coast production and refineries. It is important to quickly rebuild this infrastructure and get energy production back online for the vitality of the region and for the good of the nation.

However, Katrina and Rita have demonstrated once more the inescapable connection between land use patterns, energy consumption and economic vulnerability. Rebuilding efforts should benefit the long-term energy needs of the region, as well as provide a model of energy efficiency for other regions.

***Principle:** Newly built structures and infrastructure should be designed to use materials, energy, land and other resources as efficiently as possible. This includes not only the design of buildings, but also of neighborhoods in which walking, cycling, and public transportation are convenient choices for residents.*

There are well-established green building standards for all types of buildings, including affordable housing, commercial development, and office buildings. Professional organizations are also developing a set of standards and best practices for locating and designing large developments. Relying on these techniques will further stimulate demand for the green and energy-efficient building sectors of the construction industry.

Based on these principles, our coalitions supports the following:

- ✦ Longstanding public health and environmental protections must be maintained to ensure the health and safety of everyone working in and returning to the region.

- ✦ To ensure timely action on environmental assessments and approvals, the federal government should cooperate with state and local agencies to add sufficient agency staffing to meet the surge in demand. This will require a temporary but substantial increase in funding to boost the capacity of agencies that oversee environmental protection laws.
- ✦ Redevelopment efforts should include plans for the protection and restoration of wetlands and natural flood management areas.
- ✦ To ensure a fair assessment of which areas are too dangerous for redevelopment, the states and federal government should cooperate to establish commissions of experts to determine the zones that must be off-limits. Affected property owners should be compensated through outright purchase or by a system of purchase of development rights, whether by developers in zones identified for growth, public entities, or non-profit organizations.
- ✦ Comprehensive plans should redirect growth to areas that are suitable for development. To ensure no net loss of building stock, local leaders should prioritize building at higher densities in appropriate places.
- ✦ Flood insurance policies should be modified as necessary to allow rebuilding to safer standards and to discourage rebuilding in inappropriate areas.
- ✦ Redevelopment should adopt energy-efficient and green building standards.

Making Transportation Accessible, Equitable & Efficient

The hurricanes' aftermath exposed glaring vulnerabilities in our transportation systems. The shocking failure to evacuate families, the elderly, infirm, and others from Katrina's path underscored the need for viable mobility choices for those who do not drive. In Houston, on the other hand, the evacuation ahead of Rita was carefully prepared and implemented, but was foiled by the inability of the ordinary road system to handle such massive levels of automobile traffic. And the entire Gulf region—and the nation—ended up being equally vulnerable to the post-hurricane gasoline supply disruptions that have caused the President, governors and other public officials to call for less driving and other conservation measures.

Even in ordinary times, a lack of travel options has compounded challenges of traffic congestion, air pollution, accessibility for non-drivers, and excessive energy consumption. In times of crisis, the need is no less compelling: Modes that specialize in moving large numbers of people rapidly and flexibly—roadways, public transportation, intercity rail, and even bicycling routes—must all be pressed into service to evacuate people. It should be noted that AMTRAK reported successfully evacuating over 700 Houston residents and their belongings in just two trains. If intercity rail service were better funded, such options could become more important to overall evacuation planning.

Principle: To ensure the safety and quality of life of all citizens, all transportation modes should be well-funded and well-functioning, and the transportation needs of all citizens must be included in evacuation planning and implementation.

The manner in which we build our transportation systems impacts not only our emergency response capability, but key areas in our daily lives as well. Spread-out development in particular creates multiple problems from increased oil consumption to making jobs difficult to reach.

Principle: Redevelopment should avoid land development practices that are completely automobile dependent, so that we are not forced to drive ever-longer distances to get to jobs, schools, shopping and recreation.

Federal funds in the post-hurricane redevelopment should be committed to building communities that are less reliant on cars and gasoline, such as compact, mixed-use, transit-oriented development that places jobs, parks, residences and services closer together and promotes walking, cycling and public transportation options. Where possible, new street layouts should be designed to accommodate walking, cycling and public transit routes (known as “complete streets”). Consideration should be given to the re-zoning of neighborhoods to allow some residential development in or near job centers, thereby offering shorter commutes for some workers. The potential for light rail and other forms of public transportation should be analyzed, and new development should be clustered around transit stops and stations.

Principle: All rebuilt transportation infrastructure must be built to improve life in the surrounding communities, rather than harm it. Reconstructed streets should be “complete,” safely accommodating motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users wherever possible.

Based on these principles, our coalitions supports the following:

- ✦ In re-establishing broken transportation networks, transportation agencies should acquire rights of way sufficient to allow for future installation of rail or other more-efficient systems as resources become available to do so.
- ✦ Rebuilding efforts should emphasize building patterns that allow people to accomplish daily tasks with less driving and reduce energy consumption in the transportation sector.
- ✦ Federal funding should help build and sustain intercity rail systems to act as a backup to a struggling aviation system in ordinary times, and as an evacuation option in advance of natural disasters.
- ✦ When repairing or reconstructing transportation systems state departments of transportation should adhere to the principles and practices of context-sensitive transportation solutions, as defined by the federal Highway Administration and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. Care also must be taken to build complete streets that accommodate all users.

Expanding Job Opportunities

Thousands have seen their livelihoods eliminated in the wake of Katrina and Rita. The best way to help them return to their communities is by providing them with well-paying jobs. Though many jobs have been permanently eliminated or relocated, numerous contracts are now being awarded in the affected communities.

Principle: Whenever possible, redevelopment jobs should be offered to displaced residents so they can have steady employment and begin to return home.

Community redevelopment efforts should seek to maximize job opportunities and create building stock and infrastructure of lasting value. Studies show that building more compact, mixed-use development that is well served by public transportation tends to generate better paying and more plentiful construction and management jobs than conventional sprawl development.

As noted earlier, New Orleans and other areas of the Gulf Coast have long suffered from high concentrations of poverty, isolating low-income families from lifeline services and economic opportunities. Therefore, job creation efforts should ensure proximity to housing and transportation choices to ensure that employment opportunities are easily accessible.

Based on these principles, our coalition supports the following:

- ✦ Whenever possible, redevelopment jobs should be awarded to displaced residents so they can have steady employment and begin to return home.
- ✦ In hiring for transportation-related jobs in the affected areas, agencies should take full advantage of provisions in the new federal transportation bill that allow communities to require that large construction projects rely on a minimum percentage of workers from nearby communities (local hiring ordinances).
- ✦ Community redevelopment efforts should seek to maximize job opportunities and the value of the finished product.
- ✦ Job creation efforts should ensure proximity to housing and transportation choices to ensure that employment opportunities are easily accessible.

Planning Carefully to Spend Money Wisely

While the urge to rebuild in haste will be intense, investment in intelligent, thoughtful and inclusive planning will pay off in permanent communities of high quality and economic sustainability. Planning is important not only for areas that have been destroyed, but also

for places that have rapidly grown with evacuees, such as Baton Rouge, San Antonio, and Houston, and now must figure out how to accommodate them.

Principle: Reconstruction spending and redevelopment efforts must follow a sensible, locally-driven plan.

The planning process should be informed by decades of lessons learned about what makes whole regions and neighborhoods work better. It should bring together elected officials, business leaders, entrepreneurs, and the best minds available in community design, housing, real estate, transportation planning, and environmental protection. But the most important voices are those of current and displaced Gulf Coast residents, who must be provided the means of engaging in discussions about redeveloping their communities.

Principle: Every effort should be made to include residents from the start, and the overall process must be efficient, well-informed, and fair.

While development experts are indispensable, we must avoid relying on top-down planning by outsiders, like the undemocratic “urban renewal” initiatives of the 1960s. Federal and state governments could play a role by providing funding to support such efforts, but should not dictate or dominate the process or outcomes.

Recent experience demonstrates the effectiveness of planning with representative citizen input, even across vast geographic areas. Regions including Southern California, the Washington D.C. metro area, and Salt Lake City’s Greater Wasatch Area all have included thousands of citizens in making choices about plans for their regions’ future. New Urbanist planners and developers have perfected inclusive design workshops, called charrettes, that bring citizens together with architects, builders, planners, local officials and others to make mutually satisfactory plans for growth and development.

There are also numerous technologies that could be deployed to help even the most distant citizens participate: computer simulations and other visualization techniques; geographic information systems (GIS); “virtual town hall” meetings that can be conducted in multiple locations and could allow displaced citizens to contribute their ideas and aspirations about rebuilding their homes and their lives. The importance of this inclusive decision making is especially compelling given the fact that most of the hurricanes’ victims are lower income, African American, elderly and disabled—groups that are often overlooked in development debates.

The City of Baton Rouge has a head start on managing its growth with Plan Baton Rouge, a far-sighted effort to involve citizens in determining where and how growth will be accommodated. While other areas will need to start this process from scratch, Baton Rouge may be able to expand and update its plan to adjust to new circumstances.

Based on these principles, the coalition supports the following:

- ✦ Gulf Coast residents must be provided the means of engaging in discussions about redeveloping their communities.

- ✦ We urge the federal and state governments to fund comprehensive land use planning. Local leaders should ensure that responsible planning and design standards are used throughout the redevelopment process for the affected communities.

Creating a Regional Coordinating Redevelopment Agency

Principle: Redeveloping the Gulf Coast's metropolitan areas and towns will require strong coordination across jurisdictions, levels of government, industry sectors, and fields of expertise.

Reconstruction will require experts of virtually every type, from transportation infrastructure repair to toxic chemical remediation. Rebirth will also require the regeneration of entire institutions, such as social services, educational opportunities and housing policies. The economic and ecological health of the Gulf Coast region requires leadership, integration, and an overarching vision.

Our coalition recommends the establishment of a regional redevelopment authority to provide multi-level leadership among jurisdictions and layers of government, and to coordinate and manage the countless and varied tasks of redevelopment. The authority should be empowered to coordinate policies on the federal, state and local level. It should bring to bear significant national expertise from America's highly skilled non-profit sector as well as business leaders, elected officials, and appropriate experts. It must also include the direct participation of citizens in communities most impacted by the hurricanes and flooding.

A broad geographic focus is necessary to provide regional vision and coordination of efforts. This will include guiding regional economic development; coordinating regional transportation strategies; considering compatible guidelines for developing in flood-prone areas; and encouraging community designs that offer complementary services and aesthetics.

The redevelopment authority should ensure coordination of federal assistance and oversight of federal funding, as well as identify necessary changes to federal policy. Many of the issues raised in Gulf Coast reconstruction find their root in federal policies. The requirements of federal flood insurance programs, the application of coastal zone management provisions, federal transportation funding, and federal mortgage programs are examples of longstanding federal policies that may hamper or influence post-hurricane reconstruction. Further, the forthcoming federal funds and policies related to them must be monitored and effectively implemented.

The redevelopment authority should be designed and funded to support citizen-driven planning at the local level, and to incorporate that planning into regional efforts. Many communities, especially the hardest hit, will not have the funds to pay to get the help to put a plan together. They should be provided federal assistance to recruit leading professionals in community planning, engineering, hydrology and flood control, housing, real estate, and environmental protection and remediation. With the nation spending

untold billions on reconstruction, obtaining the best professional advice to assure the long-term integrity of rebuilding efforts will be money well spent.

Based on this analysis, our coalition supports the following:

- ✦ Congress should fund the establishment of a regional redevelopment authority to assure multi-jurisdictional coordination throughout the reconstruction process.
- ✦ This redevelopment authority should have the ability to ensure that federal, state and local planning and efforts are coordinated, that federal money is properly spent and that changes in federal policy necessary to address rebuilding are identified.
- ✦ The redevelopment authority should include elected officials, local business leaders, appropriate environmental, flood control, planning and other experts, and most importantly, citizens from the affected areas.

America's Redevelopment Challenge

We have every reason to be optimistic about our nation's ability to successfully revive the Gulf Coast. Our uniquely American ingenuity and know-how about how to create great cities, suburbs and towns makes this challenge a vital opportunity to apply the very best redevelopment tools we have to offer.

What we do in the Gulf Coast will yield important lessons and set the standard for how we can achieve excellent outcomes in the countless American communities that also have urgent needs to redevelop. Some need redevelopment because they have had little investment in recent years; these are sometimes referred to as "weak market cities." Other communities have pockets of poverty or areas and corridors that have been plagued by decayed infrastructure, low investment and obsolete building stock. Still other communities are feeling redevelopment pressures because of tremendous growth—much like Houston, Baton Rouge and other cities have because of their efforts to house the hurricanes' evacuees.

In the Gulf region, federal and regional aid must be directed to lifting the devastated communities to standards of sustainable design and high quality of life, preserving the rich cultural and architectural heritage that has made to region so much a part of the American experience. Investing in the right growth gives us better homes, and also makes good energy sense, good environmental sense, and long-term fiscal sense. Such redevelopment should serve as a national model for the ways in which America's cities and towns can and should look in the future.