

Editor's Note

In the previous issue of ARED (vol. 3, no. 1), we introduced a new and continuing feature: the ED case study. On a regular basis, we plan to present a challenging ED problem facing a real locality: in this case, the City of Moss Point, Mississippi, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

We are very pleased to print three responses to our first case study. Two of these come from authorities on disaster response and recovery who published in our previous "Economic Recovery from Disaster" issue: Babu George of Pondicherry University, India, and Gary Webb of Oklahoma State University. The third response is from Garrett Harper, Past President of ACCRA and Research Director for the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce.

We encourage any of you to contribute your responses in the form of suggestions, ideas, and even resources with regard to these real-life case studies. Please send your thoughts to Mark M. Miller, Editor, Applied Research in Economic Development / mmm4ed@gmail.com or Box 5022 / The University of Southern Mississippi / Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5022. We also look forward to your suggestions for interesting case studies for future issues. What are some especially challenging ED problems that you face in the communities you serve? Where could you use some fresh ideas from your colleagues in the profession? What cases do you think would provide good teaching tools for ED students and professional training programs? Again, we look forward to your ideas.

THE ARED CASE STUDY **RESPONSES TO: DISASTER AND RECOVERY** **IN MOSS POINT, MISSISSIPPI**

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The most vital question facing a destination ravaged by a disaster is, as aptly subtitled in the present case, "Where do we go from here?" While it is so tempting to offer a universally applicable solution to this problem, such solutions have failed wherever applied. This, however, does not need to prevent me from commenting on a recovery program insofar as the scope of such comments are restricted within the organizational and environmental background information provided to me.

It is well within our knowledge now that recovery programs initiated and managed by a collective of locally-rooted interest groups are most likely to be successful. This is because of the fact that the primal measure of sustained success of anything is acceptability: in this case, acceptability by the local society. It will be disastrous for the authorities to wait for the local society to come forward with ideas before taking the immediate rehabilitation measures.

For one thing, a community is not an individual or a small group, and hence a consensus on what to do takes some time to emerge. However, the disaster recovery management authority appointed from the top should simultaneously carry out an important public relation activity to give the community a sense of why such and such programs in such and such manners are initiated. It is not for the first time that a disaster has struck Moss Point and it was known well in advance that Katrina was going to hit it. In such a situation, the government should have constituted a permanent disaster management cell with local community leaders and opinion makers in addition to the subject experts in it.

While not discounting the initiative taken by Miller, Holden, and others, this did not happen to the fullest possible extent. Due to the strong presence of minority groups, I assume that the chances of mistrust and non-cooperation with any top-down recovery program are going to be extremely likely. In a social setting with divergent races and interests, it has been found that the social capital that glues together the community and gives it shared visions can be abysmally low, and hence it is all the more important to get proper representation from the divergent voices before imposing anything upon the community. Now, the voice of the local community should guide at least the strategic decisions with regard to the long term recovery of the affected place.

The Moss Point Commission for Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal, in my opinion, is the most impressive part of the entire exercise since it alone has the potential to chart out and build a better future for the community. Hardly after a month of the disaster, that the commission got into full swing, and

most importantly, identified and prioritized a range of Moss Point Development is indeed worth commenting. But, the range of wider local community consultation and its involvement is unclear from the case.

From my own personal experience with post-disaster recovery programs in India, I can confidently say that the first strategic priority is to help boost the morale of the local community at the affected place. This can be achieved by building the best possible disaster-resistant infrastructure; by increasing the disaster-preparedness of the community by means of training and evacuation programs, counseling sessions, and the likes; and, by providing discernible economic opportunities. If this part is not clearly demonstrated, a vast majority of community members, except those with intense place attachment, will gather whatever aid forthcoming from different sources and elope from the place in search of safer pastures elsewhere. So, at least a part of the aid coming from the different quarters ought to be channeled to help provide economic opportunities. Here also, community based businesses offer the best choice: given the natural beauty of Moss Point, community-based tourism for instance. Given the shabby track record of industrial development at Moss Point, re-inviting external private sector

investment should not be an immediate priority at all. Given its individualistic cultural orientation, co-operative society model of doing business has not been experimented much in the USA. But, in my opinion, co-operatives are more likely to be successful among a calamity-affected people since calamities often provide ample reasons for collective ventures. The funds flowing through agencies like the Mississippi Development Agency could be used to provide seed capital for peoples' co-operatives in different economic sectors. Private-sector investments from outside could be invited to further invigorate the economy once the community-centered businesses grow, stabilize, and achieve competence to combat with the private sector on a level playing field.

The Commission ought to facilitate the aforesaid developments. It can cease to exist once community managed systems and procedures are in place. However, the process of institutionalization should not be a forced one: it has a natural logic and a natural pace of development. From experiences and gut feelings, I would say that such an institutionalization may take anywhere from 3-5 years.

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The case study of Moss Point, Mississippi, published in the last issue of *ARED* is a fascinating one. Like so many communities along the Gulf Coast devastated by Hurricane Katrina, residents of Moss Point are faced with an uncertain future as they attempt to pick up the pieces and move forward. It is crucial for researchers, economic development professionals, and community leaders to reflect on cases like this to learn valuable lessons about what works and does not work in the aftermath of disasters. With that in mind, the case of Moss Point teaches us at least three important lessons about community recovery from disaster.

First, disasters can present a "window of opportunity" to the communities they strike. While it is often difficult to think of them in this way in light of the

devastation and human suffering they cause, disasters do have a bright side. The immediate response phase is typically characterized by widespread altruism and enhanced social solidarity, and the recovery period presents opportunities for community leaders, planners, and residents to think creatively about the future. Of course, the challenge for local communities is to capitalize on the opportunities presented by disasters before the window closes. In the case of Moss Point, for example,

the emphasis on eco-tourism seems to hold great promise. However, because tourism alone will not likely ensure the long-term economic viability of Moss Point, leaders need to think of ways to make Moss Point more sustainable into the future.

Second, the disaster recovery process unfolds at the local level. There is, of course, a role to be played by state and federal governments, but important decisions affecting the future of disaster-stricken communities must be made by locals. The creation of the Moss Point Commission for Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal is an excellent example of local decision making. The key players involved smartly modeled the body after a state-level commission created by the governor. It is essential for the recovery process to be driven by locals because they have the most knowledge about their communities. And because they will have to live with the consequences of their decisions, locals have a vested interest in making the recovery process successful. The major challenge is ensuring adequate involvement and representation of all parties in the process.

Thus, a third and final lesson to be gleaned from the case of Moss Point is that the key to the future lies in the past. Disaster recovery is tied to and strongly shaped by pre-disaster social, political, and economic arrangements. Prior to the storm, Moss Point was characterized by widespread poverty and a historic perception that the downtown area is

controlled by an elite, predominately white segment of the town's population. Yet, a centerpiece of the recovery plan is the redevelopment of downtown Moss Point. In order for this plan to succeed, there will have to be a buy-in from all segments of the community. Although disasters create what has been called a "therapeutic community" in their immediate aftermath, it does not take long for long-standing conflicts, cleavages, and inequalities to surface. Thus, the best way for a community to move forward after a disaster is to acknowledge and come to terms with the problems of the past. It is encouraging that key players in the case of Moss Point seem to be aware of this crucial point.

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The town of Moss Point deserves admiration for the quick and coherent efforts to reestablish itself after the Katrina devastation. In addition to, or in

spite of, declines in the town's fortunes preceding the hurricane, Moss Point demonstrates a will for resilience. Yet, the decisions about paths to rebuilding are no easier than the rebuilding itself. The student of urban economic development certainly finds much interesting and hopeful in the laboratory of a small town amidst a vast region experiencing catastrophic natural damage.

The significant questions seem several: 1) How can Moss Point implement a development plan with viable, acceptable priorities laid out, 2) how can the town sufficiently differentiate itself and its needs to overcome its pre-Katrina weaknesses in a vastly changed environment, and 3) what models might towns like Moss Point credibly look to for guidance in their search for a development path?

Moss Point possesses a set of visionary outlines that can form the framework for short- and long-range planning. New urbanism and sustainable development are notable inspirations that are welcome facets of the process that produced these outlines. Communities around the country have gravitated to these types of re-visioning where there is desire, need, will, resource, and luxury of time to plan or implement. In many cases, interesting combinations of "top down" guidance and expertise with "bottom up" community desire for urban environments have produced good

inroads into real bricks and mortar development. Yet, Moss Point

undeniably came to this process through a crisis situation. Time and resource abundance are not the luxuries that new urbanism often encounters. New approaches to urban economic development frequently stem from thoughtful, deliberative processes. While Moss Point achieved much in a short time after the storm, the immediacy of need for action hovers about.

In this light, what are the priorities to be? Wish lists are admirable and Moss Point again deserves commendation for visioning broadly for its future. Setting priorities for the list of development goals seems critical to making good or sustained headway in achieving these. The human element and the town's past did not vanish although major elements of its infrastructure and built environment did. What made the town develop along more and less satisfactory or desirable paths in the past are those same features that continue in the present. Socio-economic, racial, business, and other patterns will persist and will not be negated by a planning process or document.

In short, hard choices about realistic achievements are necessary. Different groups and interests that are willing to make trade-offs in development will be the lifeblood of an enduring, realized development plan. Initially, Moss Point rightly desires a wish list. Everything from historic preservation to eco-tourism, diversified housing options, viable downtowns, and community arts and beautification make the "short list." Resources, time, and desire for need fulfillment will dictate priorities unless those are set. Federal urban renewal in the U.S. from the 1940's made certain few, strident goals the priority. Retrospectively much damage occurred

in the life of cities. Nevertheless, priorities absent a genuine discussion about interest group trade-offs will take on a life of their own—with perhaps unexpected or unfavorable results. Moss Point is at a uniquely wonderful juncture. Now is a time for the follow-up discussions about what limited options will mean as re-development must actually commence.

The second major question is closely tied to the first. How can Moss Point not only rebuild itself physically, but also reinvent itself as a sustainable economy? The desire for a pleasant built environment is widely held. Less easy are the steps to foster sustainable economic development and growth. Moss Point experienced serious losses of employment bases, weakened tax bases, inability to capitalize on the prior upturn in Gulf development, and spending leakage to other communities. Katrina was an unwelcome wakeup call but it will not erase the endemic shortfalls of Moss Point without much accompanying thought and effort.

Workforce development ranks second to none in many estimations as the critical factor in growing, recruiting, and retaining business. The mix of desired development patterns in the built environment are admirably ambitious. They also seems more than a little incongruous with the Moss Point pre-Katrina that struggled to keep residents gainfully employed, operating businesses, and shopping near their homes. The article only references schools in passing. What must Moss Point do to reverse the long trend it was on. In many respects, the private sector vitality that the Mississippi coast experienced in the decade prior to Katrina will not rapidly return. The hard question remains: if Moss Point struggled before Katrina, where does it

pin its ambitious hopes from 2006 onward? Even more, why was Moss Point comparatively weak prior to the damage and what assertive steps will the town link with its redevelopment to break from a past trend? Also, how can Moss Point identify ways that will distinguish its efforts as much in human capital development as in the rebuilding of the structures?

Lastly, to where can Moss Point look for models to learn? New urbanism typically thrives in the remaking of long declined pockets and in wholly new sites. While Katrina ranks among the greatest of physical catastrophes to befall U.S. urban environments, literature in urban economic development may turn internationally for examples. Hurricane damage is not unlike destruction caused by war: devastating, immediate, and often not isolated. The experiences of Europe and Asia in World War II may offer examples of First World nations rebuilding towns for sustainable development. Rebuilding everything from infrastructure to society itself became necessities. Equally there, outside resources and guidance offered hope and help. Yet, the spirit of rebuilding, as in Moss Point, aspired to long-term goals based on long historic pasts. While Katrina was unique in its consequences, parallels from economic development abroad may hold rich findings for structuring discussion and planning in the towns and cities of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

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