

THE State of the City 2009



With approvals in hand, rebuilding to shift into high gear

My fellow Biloxians:

I am delighted to present to you this annual report, which gives you an update on the progress being made on the many rebuilding initiatives in our city.

The other day a reporter asked me if I was worried about the impacts of Katrina fatigue or if I ever tired of the issues we face in our rebuilding effort.

There's no doubt that those first 16 to 18 months of digging out from Katrina debris were trying for everyone, but, to be honest, I'm invigorated by the fact that we're on the cusp of seeing millions of dollars of improvements going out for bid and getting under construction.

Instead of thinking about fatigue, I prefer to think about something that I tell our residents on a regular basis: "We see a milestone – large or small – each and everyday in Biloxi, whether it's a new road being rebuilt or reopened, a new facility unveiled, someone moving into their new home, or the corner beauty shop re-opening."

Seeing those things makes you want to do more and keep things moving.

Back in January, when I delivered the annual State of the City address, I spoke about the progress being made throughout our city: more than a quarter-billion dollars in commercial and residential permits were issued in 2008; Keesler's project to construct 1,067 housing units is more than 65 percent complete; by the year's end the Biloxi Housing Authority will be serving more residents than it had before the storm; and the city, which spent \$18 million last year on moving major projects forward, is ready to begin assigning work in its \$355 million project to restore infrastructure in all storm-surge areas of the city.

But for all of the progress, I said I was far from satisfied at where we were in our rebuilding.

In January 2008, we had architects and engineers working on plans for as many as 10 city facilities. In January of this year, we have architects and engineers working on plans for 58 city facilities and assets that will account for \$411 million in new construction.

The problem is, I want to see some of these facilities coming out of the ground, and I don't think I'm alone in that feeling. We need to get on with it.

I met with architects and engineers who are working on our city projects, and I impressed upon them the need for moving forward. We've worked out timetables for just about everything that we could.

I was glad, frankly, to see Governor Barbour essentially repeat what I'd said a month earlier, that we need to be seeing projects coming out of the ground.

The governor was referring to projects being funded

with Community Development Block Grant funds through the Mississippi Development Authority. In Biloxi, those funds are being used for two projects – the Visitors Center and Lighthouse Park, and the new library and civic center on Howard Avenue. Both of those projects will be under construction this summer, well ahead of the Sept. 1 deadline the governor has set.

While the governor is speaking to the CDBG projects, I am also pushing for more progress on our overall reconstruction, which involves more than 50 projects, primarily in areas of the city inundated by Katrina storm surge. This includes city facilities, streets and drainage, water wells and lift stations, sidewalks and curbing.

In a nutshell, here's the status of our major work:

- More than a dozen of our projects are awaiting and have been awaiting federal and state approvals right now, some as far back as a year. We can't do anything until we get those approvals.
- More than a dozen are either under construction or nearing completion.
- About two dozen are still in design phase.

We've expressed our concern to Janet Napolitano, the new secretary of Homeland Security, and her staff. We've let them know about the issues that are holding up our projects, primarily the need for state and federal approvals. Exacerbating the issue in Biloxi is that a number of sites involve work on historic sites or restoring historic facilities. These involve extra levels of approvals.

But the good news, as you'll see in this 16-page report, is that many of our projects should be getting their state and federal approvals.

Throughout this recovery, we haven't come across an issue with FEMA, MEMA or the Mississippi Department of Archives and History that we couldn't resolve. The issue is the time it requires.

The fact is, Biloxi is a city that has seen its fair share of challenges over the years, whether they be natural disasters like hurricanes or a poor seafood season or man-made ones, like the financial crisis or a sputtering economy.

We've come through every one of them, just like we'll come through this.

We will not merely endure, we will prevail.

Some of you have heard me say that in the days since Katrina. It was inscribed on the library at Ole Miss. It's from William Faulkner's speech where he accepted the Nobel Prize.

He said, "I believe that man will not merely endure. He will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

For years, some people had the mistaken belief that we were flush with cash, and that we were one of the richest cities in the country. You might remember what I always said: We were healthy, not wealthy.

Today, we are still the same people we were before the storm. With a soul. With a spirit capable of compassion. And sacrifice. And endurance.

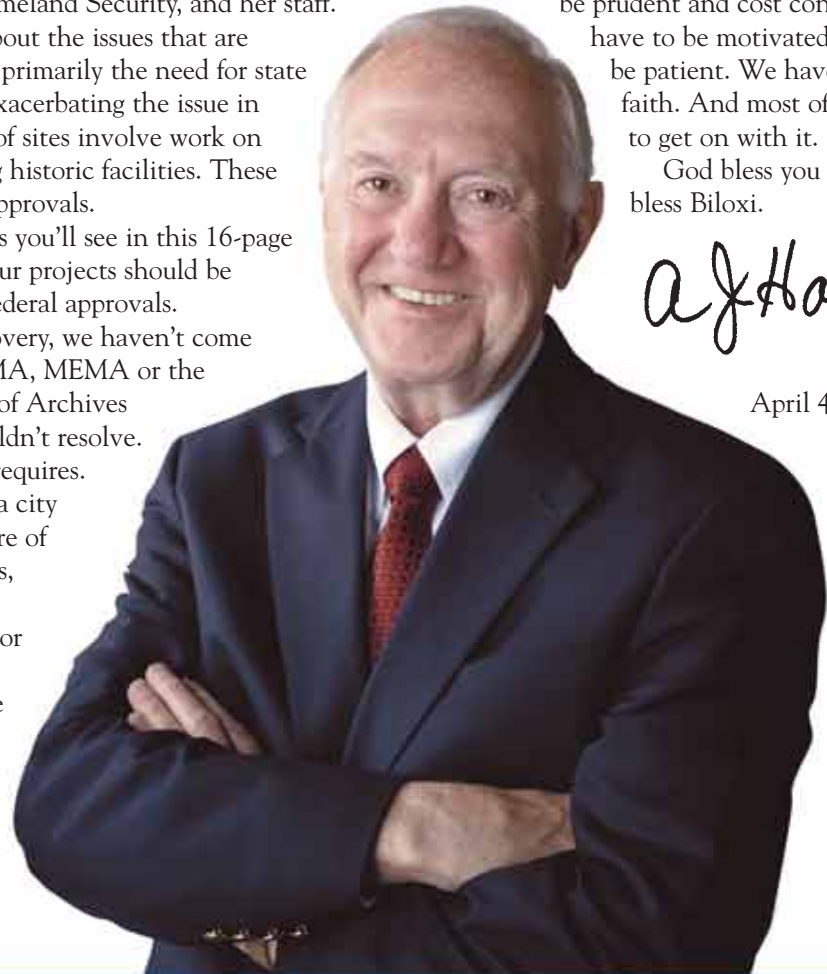
Times were indeed great in the past. And they will be again.

We are still healthy, not wealthy. The situation is far from bleak. The outlook is full of promise and opportunity.

We have to be diligent in our efforts. We have to be prudent and cost conscious. We have to be motivated. We have to be patient. We have to have faith. And most of all, we have to get on with it.

God bless you and God bless Biloxi.

April 4, 2009



About the State of the City

Since 1999, the City of Biloxi's Public Affairs Office has produced an annual State of the City newsletter, normally as a follow-up to the mayor's annual State of the City address.

The brochure fulfills the state statute that requires the mayor to provide an annual report "to the council and the public on the work of the previous year."

Since Hurricane Katrina, the city has produced an expanded version of the report each year, providing residents and a national audience a status report on the city's ongoing recovery from the Aug. 29, 2005 storm.

You can find an online version of this report – along with State of the City reports from previous years and other detailed information, videos and photos – at biloxi.ms.us.

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