

RTR plan unfolding everyday, becoming part of city policy

By Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Clark Griffith
Chairman, Revising the Renaissance initiative



The Biloxi Reviving the Renaissance plan was prepared and delivered to city leaders on July 20, 2006. The 200-plus Biloxi citizens who developed this plan emphasized several key points that we would need to do to rebuild our city after Katrina.

Among the more prevalent points was that we must “ensure we rebuild Biloxi in a smarter, more storm-resistant manner. Additionally, we need to attract new investments while preserving the character of our neighborhoods, our quality of life, and the safety of our residents.”

We continue to make headway in this mammoth undertaking and a key element to our future development is the update of the City of Biloxi Comprehensive Plan. This plan will provide:

- 1) A reflection of community values and aspirations expressing what Biloxi will be;
- 2) A guide for managing change;
- 3) A reference point for policy-making; and
- 4) A direction or action list for public projects and initiatives.

The work of quality-of-life committees and dedicated individuals who were a part of the Reviving the Renaissance initiative is playing a major role in the update of the state-mandated comprehensive plan.

The RTR plan gave our input on myriad issues the

city faced or could undertake. Some suggestions involved how we could rebuild city facilities and where. Some other ideas involved land-use and zoning.

While a number of the rebuilding initiatives are already underway, some require additions and revisions to the city’s land-use and zoning ordinances, architectural design standards and other measures.

That’s where the comprehensive plan and land development ordinance come in. They will help transform many of our RTR ideas into formal city policy. The land development ordinance will help ensure that developers, architects and builders carry out the ideas and vision put forth in the Reviving the Renaissance initiative.

The city’s plan is being guided by Wallace Roberts and Todd, a planning firm that has done extensive work in Baltimore; Charleston County and Hilton Head, South Carolina; Coral Springs, Fla., East Hampton, NY, and other cities.

In January, many of us attended public open houses where the details of the new comprehensive plan for our city were outlined and discussed.

At these meetings, the Wallace Roberts and Todd team presented to the public what our city’s vision might look like. Their “draft” of a citywide vision statement should sound very familiar to the citizens who worked on the Reviving the Renaissance plan. Statements contained in this draft of a vision statement are a prime example.

The best of Biloxi’s past -- its cultural heritage, natural resources, and the spirit of its people -- is carried forward and enhanced in a prosperous, resilient city for the 21st Century. The City’s 21st Century renaissance is based on:

1) A diverse, thriving economy that capitalizes on Biloxi’s assets: its natural and cultural resources, economic anchors, status as a premiere visitor destination, and the entrepreneurial spirit of its people.

2) A healthy environment that supports quality of life, sustains the economy, and protects against storm damage and flooding.

3) A welcoming community that celebrates Biloxi’s unique character and sense of place; provides opportunities for all citizens; and takes care of those in need.

All of these correspond to the framework established in the Biloxi citizens’ Reviving the Renaissance plan.

While these “visions” are necessary and helpful, the real usefulness of this update will be the “how” this plan will be structured and implemented.

Work on these portions of this update continues for the next few months. A completed update should be finished in late May or early June timeframe.

You can monitor the progress or even better, you can have input on the plan by going to the Biloxi website at biloxi.ms.us and click on the icon at lower right that says Comprehensive Plan Update. You can also find a link the complete Reviving the Renaissance report on that page.

Be a part of the process. Provide input to the overall plan.

It is refreshing to see that the hard work and expertise the citizens of Biloxi put into the Reviving the Renaissance Steering Committee are continuing to be used as we plan for the future. The success of any plan requires the input and backing of the people it will serve.

A snapshot of progress

Biloxi’s recovery from Hurricane Katrina has continued to see its share of milestones.

Here are some of the highlights from the past year:

- More than a quarter-billion dollars in construction permits was issued in 2008, including nearly \$170 million worth in commercial construction, and more than \$52 million in residential development. The city continues to average \$4 million in construction permits in an average week.
- Keesler Air Force Base has made significant progress in its \$512 million initiative to construct 1,067 new housing units for Keesler families. More than 400 families have moved into new base housing. More than 65 percent of the work has been completed, and all will be completed in the first quarter of 2010.
- The Biloxi Housing Authority is continuing its work to provide affordable housing for residents. To give you an idea of how far the Biloxi Housing Authority has come, the day before Katrina they had 474 units. The day after Katrina they had only 202 inhabitable units. Today, the Hope VI rentals are all occupied. The housing authority has 686 occupied units overall, with an additional 162 units coming on line by March 31, 2009. By the end of 2009, between tax credit properties and Section VIII housing, the authority will be assisting 1,600 families.
- Enrollment at Biloxi Public Schools is still 20 percent off its pre-Katrina level of 6,100 students, but numbers are expected to increase once more housing comes online. In 2008, Biloxi was one of only nine districts in the state where every school in the district either met or exceeded federal benchmarks for progress. The school system is in the midst of a \$15 million capital project program that includes the opening of a new wing at the high school to accommodate the move of the ninth grade from the junior high.
- The city spent more than \$18 million in 2008 on moving major rebuilding efforts forward, including the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor, Point Cadet Marina, and the restoration of the Biloxi Community Center and fire stations in east Biloxi.
- The city issued permits for three new hotels – \$22.7 million in construction, and more than 300 new rooms – on the beachfront. Elsewhere in the city, permits were issued for three new apartment complexes, accounting for 340 new apartments and more than \$20 million in construction.
- The city’s current budget is \$622 million with \$495 million in capital projects. (Before gaming, the city’s annual budget was about \$30 million, and before Katrina, the city had an annual budget of about \$120 million, which included anywhere from \$20 to \$40 million in locally funded capital projects.)
- Today, the city has architects and engineers working on plans for 58 city facilities and assets that will account for \$411 million in new construction.

To see more of Biloxi’s Katrina sculptures, visit biloxi.ms.us.