

Vision: Rebuild 'new urban' Mississippi coast

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

Turn Biloxi and Gulfport into Mississippi's Monte Carlo, the European gambling paradise on the French Riviera. Make mobile homes look less like mobile homes by adding front porches. Downsize big-box stores and hide their mega-parking lots from public view by putting them behind the stores.

These are some of the grand visions that will be debated and sometimes derided when more than 100 architects, planners, developers and transportation specialists from across the USA descend on Mississippi's hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast Wednesday.

They will be there for a week of brainstorming with local officials on how to rebuild 11 communities in three Mississippi counties along 120 miles of shore devastated by Hurricane Katrina Aug. 29.

The conference is part of Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour's ambitious plan to rebuild "the right way."

One of the people Barbour has turned to is town planner Andres Duany of Miami, a man known as the father of "new urbanism." That is a movement that embraces old-fashioned town design — communities where people can walk from home to shops and offices, houses with front porches to encourage social interaction and residences above stores.

But it's a movement that has rarely been linked with Mississippi sensibilities. The state, still haunted by its violent civil rights history, often ranks last or close to it in measures of progress from educational attainment to per-capita income. In the public eye, Mississippi and progressive thinking are rarely synonymous.

"New urbanism and Mississippi is an oxymoron right there in the minds of most people," says Marty Wiseman, director of the Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University. "It's definitely different from how we've done things in the past."

The hodgepodge development boom that spread along the Gulf Coast after the arrival of casinos in 1992 could make locals more receptive to "smart growth" principles that aim to protect the environment and community ties.

"In 30 years, when I'm dead and gone, people will look at what the coast and South Mississippi have become," Barbour told the Mississippi Legislature last month. "If it is simply a newer version of today, we will have failed those people — our children and grandchildren."

Already, Barbour has signed legislation that allows casinos, which previously had to be built on the water, to move 800 feet inland.

Coastal Mississippi has much tradition to build on.

"The architectural heritage of Mississippi is fabulous, ... really, really marvelous,"

Duany says, referring to antebellum mansions in Greek Revival and Federal styles that have imposing entrances, balconies and columns and smaller Creole cottages for the less wealthy. "However, what they have been building the last 30 years is the standard, tawdry strip developments. The government's vision is to start again and do it right."

Don't tell them what to do

Duany is an expert in organizing planning sessions that get community leaders to reach consensus on what they want their towns to be.

He has rounded up top thinkers in transportation, landscape, design, environment, architecture, community needs and land use to meet with mayors and county executives, business and church leaders, planners and developers, casino owners and poor residents. Many of the professionals are doing it for free or for a fraction of their firms' usual billing rates.



2001 photo
'New urbanists' like designs of older
ouses such as this one in Natchez,
Miss.

This week, mayors and councilmembers of small towns such as Waveland, D'Iberville and Pass Christian could have discussions with the nation's top architects and planners about street design, housing style, transit lines, zoning, building codes and affordable housing.

"I can guarantee you (local leaders) are not going to adopt all of these things," says Jim Barksdale, the former Netscape CEO who heads the governor's Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal Commission, which must submit a final report by year's end. "We got (new urbanists) because they were good task leaders in getting large groups of people together, not for new urbanism. These (local) people don't need anybody to come and tell

them how to do their jobs."

The message is clear. Although the state under Barbour, former head of the Republican National Committee, has gained a higher profile on the national stage, "Mississippi has a chip on its shoulder," Wiseman says. "We want help, but we don't want people to tell us what to do."

The outsiders, however, will suggest plenty on key issues:

•**Mobile homes.** They are a reality in a vast region where so much housing has been obliterated and needs to be replaced quickly. "Mobile homes are permanent housing, not temporary," Duany says. "Mobile homes are the only housing affordable to a large portion of the population."

New urbanists are working with manufacturers to fashion mobile home designs that incorporate better finishes and architectural touches such as front porches. "The mobile home industry knows very well nobody loves them, and they see this as a chance to be acceptable," Duany says.

•**Community design.** Hundreds of housing blueprints are sold to developers to keep their costs low. Duany's group culled several that fit the region's history and

climate. Builders can be encouraged to use them through incentives such as fast-track building permits.

•**Big-box retailers.** "We would love it if every town had their own Home Depot rather than having two huge ones causing traffic congestion," Duany says. "We don't want them to be driving two towns down to go to Wal-Mart."

Barksdale predicts that will meet strong resistance. "Wal-Marts are big tax revenue producers," he says. "Those that have their Wal-Marts will want to keep their Wal-Marts."

•**Casinos.** New urbanists say Monte Carlo, seat of the principality of Monaco, shows how casinos can fit in with their towns — especially now that the gaming houses will be allowed on shore. Casinos can be linked with downtown businesses so that they also can benefit from the influx of gamblers.

That may not fly, either.

"My desire is not to have casinos woven into the fabric of the community," Gulfport Mayor Brent Warr says. He says the city's two casinos will remain next to the water, away from downtown.

•**Building codes.** Communities will have to decide whether they want to do what Florida did after Hurricane Andrew in 1992 — toughen building codes for new housing.

Who will pay?

Whatever rebuilding vision emerges will have "to include plans on how you actually implement this," Barksdale says. "The governor's idea of renaissance is what this place is going to look like 20 years from now. What could we do to make it dramatically better? Get ideas on the table. ... Because we have such devastation, we have the ability to plan long term in ways that most communities wouldn't have the opportunity to do."



2002 file photo
A home and candy business in Vicksburg, Miss. The new urbanism vision is reviving the tradition of living over a business.

Some reconstruction money will come from the federal hurricane aid package and Small Business Administration loans, some from the state and some from private insurance. But the biggest stumbling block may be market forces. They're already at play along the coast as land speculators snap up properties along the coast.

"There's a push and shove between people who want to take the beach and build condominiums and some local people who don't want to have anything to do with that," Barksdale says.

Duany says the key is to create incentives for developers to build the way a community wants.

"The developers will do as told so long as the path is easier," he says. "Right now, the easiest path is building junk. We'd like to rebalance that through pre-permitting."

Nothing will be imposed. ... Everything is incentive-based."

Some urban planners are skeptical that the ideal of late 19th-century town design, often built around social centers such as schools, churches and community centers, can be adapted to the Gulf Coast's main industry: gambling.

"Are you telling me they're going to do a new urbanist village when the center of the economy is vice?" asks Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "Casinos in Mississippi were such a pariah land use that they were not even on land. Now they're going to be the basis of a traditional community?"

Tourists ultimately may have a say.

Lenny Pereira owns Air Around The Clock, an air-conditioning company in Sunrise, Fla. Mississippi's Gulf Coast is where he took a dozen managers once a year for the past six years for a relaxing three-day getaway. They'd stay at the Beau Rivage Hotel and eat at Mary Mahoney's in Biloxi and they'd party one night on Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

"All that is gone now," he says. Now they'll go to Tunica, Miss., where casinos are built on the Mississippi River about 300 miles inland.

They'll do their big-city partying in Memphis on Beale Street, at least until the coast is rebuilt.

"If nothing had happened ..., I would've left it just as is," he says. "Being it's been destroyed, why not do it with new urbanism? Give people who work there a chance at housing. I think building it up the new way today is the way to go."

Gulfport Mayor Warr says the coast one day will look vastly different. "Everything down here is changed now," he says. "We will retain ... our Southern history and culture. We're going to hang on to a ton of that architecture, that taste and that feeling. But things that weren't as beautiful, we'll let them fade in history."