



Katrina Confronted: *Seeing for Themselves*

“It is impossible to understand the immensity of the devastation and the problem without seeing it for yourself. You can’t see it on TV, you can’t hear about it—you have to actually witness it to understand the scope and the complexity of the problem.”

Touring New Orleans allowed component manufacturers to grasp the enormity of the recovery effort.

by Marisa Peters

at a glance

- ❑ The immensity of the devastation from Hurricane Katrina is something you have to witness first-hand to understand its scope and the complexity.
- ❑ Post-Katrina New Orleans is not going to be a quick fix; the damage to the city and its infrastructure is too dramatic to be repaired in even a few years.
- ❑ Many Gulf Coast residents were waiting for the release of updated flood advisories to begin rebuilding or repairing their homes.
- ❑ The Gulf Opportunity Zone Act of 2005 is federal legislation that was passed in order to encourage economic development in areas impacted by Katrina.

Where there is destruction, there will be reconstruction. The struggle to repair damage and return to normal begins immediately after any kind of tragedy, whether natural or otherwise. People and communities strive to return to their normal lives, pick up where they left off before the storm, evacuation, accident—whatever it may have been. This holds true in the case of Hurricane Katrina, which hit Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi on August 29, 2005. This particular reconstruction process may be taking longer than others in the past that followed less devastating events, but it is happening. However slowly or painfully it may seem to some, it is there and it is progressing.

In New Orleans, cleanup is not yet complete, and restoration has barely begun. Some people are still waiting to receive their temporary Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers that will serve as homes until something more permanent can be arranged—whether that means rebuilding or moving away. Decaying homes and crumbling structures are everywhere, and at times this makes it difficult to believe that some progress has indeed been made. This is what some attendees of the Mid South Component Manufacturers Association realized while touring heavily-damaged areas in and around New Orleans in April 2006.

While there is noticeable restoration and activity downtown, it’s a different story in the suburbs, said Rip Rogers, soon-to-be-retired vice president of Trussway, Ltd. in Cedar Park, TX. “Out in residential areas that we went to...we were there eight months after Katrina hit, and there were houses that hadn’t been touched,” he said.

Along with several others, Rogers had the opportunity to see what Katrina did to the New Orleans area while on the tour. Scott Ward at Southern Components, Inc. in Shreveport, LA, organized and led the three-plus hour tour that took the group through different parts of the city. Seeing the situation in person had a definite and lasting effect.

“I think closer to the end [of the tour], there was so much devastation and destruction,” Scott said. “It was much more overwhelming than what they [the attendees] had seen in the media. Basically, they were just overwhelmed and speechless by that point.”

The tour that Scott organized included parts of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Chalmette—which is to the east of the Lower Ninth Ward, and the Lakeview area—which is very near Lake Pontchartrain. “Those neighborhoods were just totally devastated,” said Scott.

The group was staying at a hotel in the French Quarter, an area that wasn’t hit as hard as others due to its being on higher ground, and one that has also benefited from comparatively quicker cleanup and repair. The difference between what the group saw there and what they saw on their tour was significant.

“It was really dramatic going from being downtown, where we were staying, and driving out into that area that was more affected,” said Derek Moody, president of Rogers Manufacturing Company in West Monroe, LA. “Driving into that area looks like a ghost town.”

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Tour participants were struck by the sight of a fully restored house in the midst of a largely devastated neighborhood.

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While moving through the tour, attendees saw various scenes of damage and decay not unlike those that many have seen on television. However, seeing it in person seems to have strongly impacted each person, leaving precise images in their minds several weeks after the tour ended and they returned to their home areas.

"It is impossible to understand the immensity of the devastation and the problem without seeing it for yourself," said Bob Ward, Scott's father and general manager/owner of Southern Components. "You can't see it on TV, you can't hear about it—you have to actually witness it to understand the scope and the complexity of the problem."

Moody said what struck him the hardest was seeing a fully redone and nicely-groomed house and yard towering over a still untouched neighborhood of about 50 or 75 crumbling former homes. The grass and shrubs were manicured and green, no debris littered the yard, cars were in the driveway and its inhabitants had clearly returned. In contrast, everything directly adjacent to this house and across the street was abandoned, and trash was piled many feet high on front lawns.

"We drove by it...and we were like, this house just sticks out like a sore thumb," Moody said. "It was the reverse of driving through an intact, nice neighborhood and seeing a house that had fire damage or was demolished....Every other house around there for blocks was in terrible shape."

Moody said he wondered how people could live among so many houses that haven't been cleaned or repaired. "How do you emotionally, mentally, every day, drive by that? It's got to be tough."

One image that stuck with Rogers was of houses that were completely displaced by the storm and left resting in the middle of a street. "I saw two houses, built on a slab foundation with brick veneer," he said. "They were picked up by the storm surge, moved six blocks away and dumped in the middle of the street—with the slab still attached."



Some houses were picked up by the storm surge—slabs and all—and moved blocks away from their original address.

No Quick Fix

It has been clear from the beginning that post-Katrina New Orleans was not going to be a "quick fix." The damage to the city and its infrastructure was too dramatic to be repaired in

a few months, or even a few years. The process of cleanup alone has been a tremendous undertaking, meaning that moving on to actual rebuilding has taken (and is taking) quite a while in most places. The reasons for this are complicated and numerous, with the end result being that deciding how or when to be part of the rebuilding effort as a business, and specifically as a component manufacturer, is tricky.

Until recently, many residents and businesses were in a kind of holding pattern while they waited for more information and advice from the government, said Jim Saintignan, who has been working and living in New Orleans at least half of every week since December. He is also a close friend of Scott's, and previously worked in sales at Southern Components.

Saintignan is involved with several different industries and companies in the New Orleans area, doing work such as preparing FEMA trailers to be used as temporary housing, elevating homes and helping to erect modular houses. He said what people were waiting for was new advisory flood data (often called flood maps in conversation), which was released by the government in mid-April.

"Everyone's been in limbo since the storm," said Saintignan. "They've got a house that needs repairing so they can move in, but everybody's been on hold waiting for these flood maps to come out."

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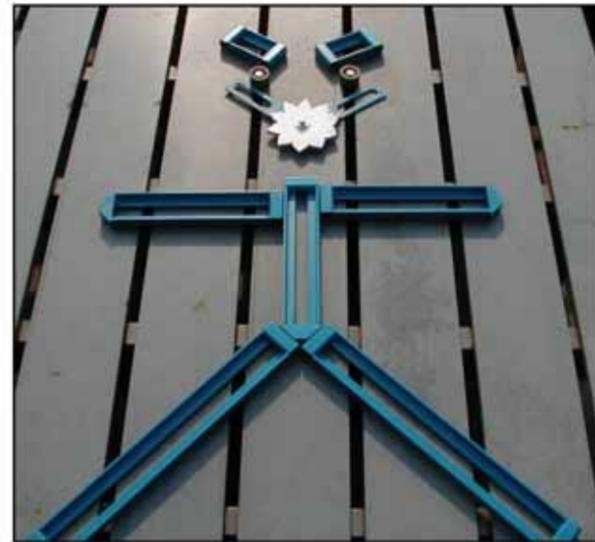
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These flood maps are important to residents and owners because they offer advice and recommendations regarding whether or not a structure should be rebuilt in the same place, whether or not it should be elevated, and if it should be, how high. The maps will not be law until they are incorporated into official flood maps, which will take about a year. However, some locals still wanted to wait for the recommendations before making reconstruction plans, so they would know what to do to lessen the risk of their homes flooding

"There's a shortage of everything," he said. "There's enough for everybody [all types of businesses] to do."

But, the trick is to figure out what needs to be done where, and which of those needs a company can fulfill. Saintignan's advice to those interested is to send someone to the region, and have that person spend at least a couple of weeks in order to get a real feel for the situation, what needs to be done, and how to do it best. This is an important step.

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*For a complete list of references, visit **Support Docs** at www.sbcmag.info.

again. For example, Scott Ward said that houses in the Lakeview area were being elevated as much as ten feet in response to the new maps.

Getting Involved

As a consequence of these flood maps being released, Saintignan said he believes the reconstruction and elevation of damaged houses will pick up because people now know what has to be done. And with that increase, he said, there will probably be fewer new FEMA trailers going up. However, that doesn't change the fact that there are already so many in the city and surrounding areas that t-shirts about them are available for sale.

"In some areas, FEMA trailers are so widespread that you literally can turn down streets, and there's a FEMA trailer in every yard," said Saintignan.

This is because homeowners' FEMA trailers are often placed near their uninhabitable houses and hooked up to those sewer and water lines. So, as houses are elevated and repaired, the need for trailers should lessen—although it certainly won't go away completely. Saintignan also said some of this switch is occurring simply because some people have now managed to get enough money together, or enough of a plan, to begin returning to the city, a phenomenon un-related to the release of maps.

All of this is why now might be the time to get involved for component manufacturers who want to do business in the area. While mass rebuilding has not yet started, Saintignan said this is probably the time for companies to try to figure out where they will fit in to the reconstruction of New Orleans.

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"Everybody just wants to walk in and take over," he said. "And you can't do that. You've got to come down here and pay your dues, stay here for two weeks or a month, and get an idea of where you fit in."

Gulf Opportunities

Business in Katrina-damaged areas is something that is generally welcomed and encouraged by many, including the federal government. In fact, in an effort to spur economic recovery and growth, federal legislation was passed in December 2005 that established various incentives for businesses in the Gulf Opportunity Zone (GO Zone), which includes Katrina-damaged areas in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana (see map below).

According to a White House press release, the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act of 2005 assists local businesses by: doubling small business expensing from \$100,000 to \$200,000 for investments in new equipment, providing a 50 percent bonus depreciation for all businesses, and extending tax relief to the building of new structures. It will also make loans and loan guarantees available for small businesses to help them get started again.²

Dan Holland, president of Clearspan Components in Meri-



While the roads of New Orleans have been mostly cleared of debris, many lawns are still scattered with everything from stuffed animals to lunch pails to appliances.

dian, MS, and one of the tour attendees, said he thinks this legislation has indeed encouraged companies to build new facilities in his area (which is about 130 miles north of the coast and within the GO Zone) and others. "Half the cost of whatever is purchased is fully deductible as an expense in the first year of use," he said. "And that will shield an enor-



The Hurricane Katrina Gulf Opportunity Zone includes parts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. It is as shown here, with the additions of Marengo County in Alabama, and Holmes and Humphreys Counties in Mississippi.³

mous amount of income from income tax."

Holland said that companies need to think about the long run too, though.

"That's a more long range thing about the recovery," he said. "I see our industry, and probably other industries, building more facilities than will be needed in the long term because of the tax incentives. And they certainly need to have a long-term outlook, if they're considering building a facility there, of how much business will be there to support the facility ten years down the road."

Rogers also did not see the area as being a good breeding ground for new component manufacturing plants—at least not the New Orleans area alone. "Right now, there's not a lot of truss business down there," he said. "In time, there may be some. But if anyone was thinking the city of New Orleans would fuel a venture into the truss business, that won't happen."

Fewer People & More Debris

While rebuilding may begin to progress a bit faster now, it is likely to still be several years to a decade before New Orleans really starts to feel like the city it used to be. The damage is so widespread, and requires so much planning and physical work to repair, that there doesn't seem to be a way to make the recovery a timely one.

Scott said he thinks many people can't grasp how much damage there really is. It's not limited to downtown or any specific area. The destruction is everywhere a person looks and goes—from home to work to the grocery store.

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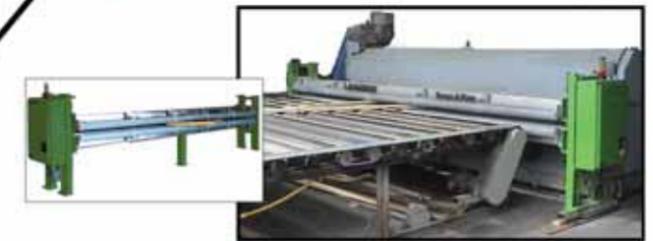
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Natural Disaster Assistance:

As the building components industry heard about the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, WTCA members contacted staff in a flurry of calls and emails to find out whether their peers escaped the storm without harm, and whether they could provide assistance to component manufacturers affected by the storm.

The outpouring of support for hurricane victims led to the creation of a forum called **Members Helping Members**. Dubbed the **M2M Forum**, it is designed to connect those in our industry who have been victimized by such events with those who can provide assistance.

WTCA members who have weathered the storm can post updates on their status and detail ways in which others can lend a hand. In turn, members can use this online forum to offer assistance such as finan-

cial contributions, donations of equipment, supplies, and transportation, or offers to fulfill pending orders in order to keep customers' projects on schedule.

In addition to the **M2M Forum**, check out WTCA's Disaster Assistance web page for a list of resources and links to domestic relief efforts. There's also a list of past **SBC** articles relating to building code reform, reviews of storm damage and emergency preparedness.

Remember: When disaster strikes, you're not alone! Your fellow WTCA members are here to help. Visit www.sbcindustry.com/m2m_forum.php or www.sbcindustry.com/naturaldisaster.php for more information about natural disaster relief and how you can be of assistance to those in need.

The destruction is everywhere a person looks and goes—from home to work to the grocery store.

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"Basically, the way I feel is that it's going to take at least five years or more [to rebuild]," Scott said. "The main thing people don't understand is that the devastation goes on for miles and miles. It's not just a centralized area in New Orleans. We're talking about miles of devastation."

Rogers said one thing that seemed to be mostly completed is the clearing of debris in roads. However, the same can't be said for yards. He saw everything from stuffed animals to lunch pails to appliances scattered in them. "I've never seen anything like it, and never will again," Rogers said.

The amount of debris still present on private property isn't surprising, considering how much of it Hurricane Katrina created. According to a White House report, the storm generated 118 million cubic yards of debris.⁴ If all of this was stacked onto the space of a football field, it would be over ten and a half miles high.

Other statistics supplied by the same report help to illustrate what an immense and time-consuming process the reconstruction will be. Katrina made an estimated 300,000 homes uninhabitable—more than both Hurricane Andrew in 1992, and all four of 2004's major hurricanes combined (Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne). The storm flooded approximately 80 percent of New Orleans, impacting almost 93,000 square miles across 138 parishes and counties. It is estimated that the cost of Hurricane Katrina will approach the \$100 billion mark. If so, it will be the first disaster in America to do so—natural or otherwise.

As is well-publicized, Hurricane Katrina displaced a very large number of residents. Most of the tour attendees said they view population numbers as likely to increase slowly as reconstruction moves along. The government report said that around 770,000 people were displaced in total, from all damaged areas. That is the most since the Dust Bowl migration from the southern Great Plains region in the 1930s.

Holland estimated that population is at about 50 percent of what it used to be in areas that were flooded by only two or three feet of water. Areas that were more heavily flooded seem deserted. "There are a lot fewer people in every neighborhood, even downtown, than there used to be," he said.

He said he thinks it will take about ten years to get population levels back to where they were. Saintignan offered the same estimation.

"I don't know if the population will be back where it was

before," he said. "But I would say that, between five to ten years from now, the population will level off and go back to normal city growth."

Long Haul

While finding the correct timing and niche are prerequisites to successfully doing business in New Orleans, component manufacturers aiming to be part of the reconstruction shouldn't expect too much too soon, according to the tour attendees.

Moody, who said he and his company have been giving thought to doing business in Katrina-affected areas, also acknowledged that the whole process is going to be a lengthy one. "The rebuilding won't be as fast and furious as a lot of people think," he said.

"I think that...[component manufacturers] need to maintain realistic expectations and not expect things to happen too quickly," Holland said. **SBC**

Many thanks to Rip Rogers, Scott Ward and Kris Odom for providing photos for this article.

Population Statistics Before & After Hurricane Katrina:

These populations were obtained from US Census data.⁵

Alabama:

Statewide population as of July 1, 2005: 855,874

Estimated statewide population as of January 1, 2006: 855,681

Mississippi:

Statewide population as of July 1, 2005: 1,882,198

Estimated statewide population as of January 1, 2006: 1,839,808

Louisiana:

Statewide population as of July 1, 2005: 3,330,600

Estimated statewide population as of January 1, 2006: 2,985,819

The following are the Louisiana parishes with the highest proportional decreases in population from July 1, 2005 to January 1, 2006.

1. St. Bernard Parish:

Population as of July 1, 2005: 64,576

Estimated population as of January 1, 2006: 3,361

2. Orleans Parish

Population as of July 1, 2005: 437,186

Estimated population as of January 1, 2006: 158,353

3. Plaquemines Parish

Population as of July 1, 2005: 28,282

Estimated population as of January 1, 2006: 20,164

4. Jefferson Parish

Population as of July 1, 2005: 448,578

Estimated population as of January 1, 2006: 411,305

5. Cameron Parish

Population as of July 1, 2005: 9,493

Estimated population as of January 1, 2006: 7,532

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