



**South Bay Communities Alliance, Coden–AL Port–Heron Bay- Mon Luis– Sans Souci, AL**

**Excessive Re-Building Codes + Permissive Formaldehyde Levels – Govt. Accountability = Post Katrina Casualties :  
Why We Need the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (<http://www.solvingpoverty.com/>)**

**by Paul Nelson, President South Bay Communities Alliance, Coden, Alabama, March 2009**

► ***(Nov. 13, 2008 request from Alabama Congressman Artur Davis to Speaker Nancy Pelosi)***

“As you consider a second economic stimulus bill, please allow me to direct your attention to the recent testimony ....on behalf of Governor Bob Riley...the small towns dotting Alabama’s coastline continue their struggle to rebuild...over 3,400 occupied housing units suffered major or severe damage. In Mobile County, approximately 1,020 qualify for assistance, however it is estimated that with existing funds, the county will be able to assist less than 300 households.”

► **Among these 1020 families who qualified for federal rebuilding assistance two years ago:** their average income is \$\$19,202/yr, 31% are elderly, 30% care for disabled family members, 58% have minor children “often headed by single parents (or grandparents)”. They could not apply until Jan. 2007. <http://financialservices.house.gov/hearing110/baab.pdf>. \*

► **Among these 1020 families:** “...120 conventional or manufactured homes that are either completely gone or totally uninhabitable....500 homes continue to need extensive rehabilitation. This need cannot be met with existing funds in the CDBG grant.” There are many others besides these 1020 families without assistance: “hundreds applied after the [one-week] deadline...due to limited funding Mobile County has been unable to assist renters.” (Kathy McHugh, administrator of Mobile Co. Katrina CDBG Funds, Jan. 29, 2009 letter to Alabama Arise organizer for So. Alabama.)

The **Gulf Coast Civic Works Act** could provide some 100,000 jobs that could rebuild storm damaged homes and infrastructure ; restore government accountability; restore our environment and our barrier Dauphin Island, thus putting our commercial fishermen, and “Pop & Mom” processors back to work; and provide democratic citizen input for these CCC like projects. **Sadly, however, as we continue our struggle to rebuild, I feel I must testify that it has also become one of life and death. Mrs. Nghieu Nguyen, and her daughter, are among many who currently represent this tragedy.**



Photo Nov. 4, 2008 by Kieu Lien Atwell case-worker for Boat People SOS Bayou La Batre, and Zack Carter, Organizer AL Arise

“My name is Nghieu Nguyen. I lived with my daughter at 8875 Lindberg Street [Bayou La Batre, AL] for 5 years before Hurricane Katrina. When Katrina came my house was flooded....Everything in our house was destroyed...because I don’t speak English I was not able to get enough help...my house has mold...I have lung cancer...water leaks through my roof and my front door is falling apart. I beg for any organization to please help this mother and daughter.” (Mrs. Nguyen’s and her case-worker’s statements are attached)

No one actually perished in Alabama during Katrina, *but twelve of my family and neighbors most of whom lived within a half-mile radius of my home*, have died since. I list them below on the “**San Souci, Alabama Katrina Human Casualty Map.**” They all saw their houses either blown away or flooded by Katrina. Each had to go to their graves without hope of having their homes rebuilt, or repaired for their children or spouses. Many of these long-time community members spent a year or more in these formaldehyde contaminated FEMA campers. All of the FEMA campers randomly tested by the Sierra Club in Alabama showed excessive formaldehyde vapors, including the one my mother lived in, Hilda Hebert Nelson.

As our maritime ancestors have done for over 300 years, I began to rebuild our family home after Katrina hit. But like others, I was told to tear down what I built because it would not meet the new elevation code. *These codes, which alone cost over \$20,000, have forced working and middle class people in rural coastal Alabama to depend on federal assistance to rebuild -- which for most of us, has not come.*



These valued community members lost after Katrina were listed by South Bay Communities Alliance’s late president Jim Fuller and myself in the letter we sent to the Senate leadership last summer. Mr. Fuller’s letter states:

**...South Bay Communities Alliance (SBCA) is volunteer grass roots, multi-cultural organization in South Mobile County, AL. We organized in early 2006 when we became aware that especially the unincorporated**

areas of Alabama had been substantially overlooked and under-funded for Katrina disaster CDBG funding. The Senate hearing of September 25, 2007, publicly revealed life-threatening conditions of Alabama's rural victims. SBCA Board Member, Paul Nelson states:

**“Codan has never seen so many people pass in such a short time. My neighbor Delaphine Barber, age 75 lost her home and died of heart attack about a year after Katrina. Other neighbors who died, trying to survive in the FEMA campers, and hoping to see their homes rebuilt were: Sally Dismukes, age 72, died of a heart attack; Tommy Barbour age 56, died of lung cancer; Michael Goleman, age 36 husband and father of two teenage daughters, suicide; Shirley Clark, age 65, complications following a staph infection; Randy Hall, age 45, lung cancer; Nancy Maples, age 57. Most have spouses or dependents who are still hoping to see family homes rebuilt. My mother, Hilda Nelson died after living in a FEMA camper over a year and hoping for assistance to rebuild the family home that never came...”**

Three people listed on the edge of the **San Souci, Alabama Human Casualty Map** lived a few miles from my neighborhood. Tommy Barbour lived a couple of miles north in Bayou La Batre. He was a longtime leader of the oystermen's union, and a long time close friend. I helped Tommy realize his last request -- to have his FEMA camper door widened so that the Providence Hospital bed could fit through the camper door. He wanted to live his last days at “home” with his wife Becky -- who has yet to receive any assistance to rebuild their home of some 20 years.

Randy Hall, lived a few miles east of Sans Souci, in Alabama Port, not far from Mobile Bay. He was also a labor leader among our commercial fishermen and a strong voice against coastal pollution.

Larry Roberts, was in his late 50's and lived on rental property in Bayou La Batre. He was a seaman, and cherished life even after his second leg was amputated. He was an outspoken member of the African American community and publicly criticized FEMA on our local CBS TV affiliate for leaving an eviction notice on his FEMA camper while he was in Providence Hospital in Mobile. His last speech was as a patient at Providence in October 2006. He was escorted in his wheel chair to an Alabama Arise meeting in the hospital's conference room. He addressed the crowd of 40 people with a 15 minute passionate talk about the injustice faced by Katrina survivors from Texas to Alabama.

Three more Sans Souci neighbors died during the 2008 holidays, including Jim Fuller, the first President of South Bay Communities Alliance.

Margaret Singleton, who has depended on a blue tarp since Katrina, in her often wet and cold trailer, died last month of respiratory failure. Another recent victim, Mary Alice Lee, lived at the corner of Kennedy Road and Railroad Street for decades -- next to the wetland where the City of Bayou La Batre plans to build a condo-friendly waste treatment plant with about 25% of the total of Katrina CDBG Funds received from HUD for our state. ***All four homes and the barn on Kennedy Road were blown away by Katrina.*** One can see their foundations by zooming in on the above map.

Mary Alice's son and daughter in law, Tommy and Faye Lee lived in a home halfway down the road. Their homeowners insurance only paid \$1200 on their home, with a market value of \$80,000. They had completely paid it off years ago. They have been waiting on a Katrina CDBG since they lined up with 4,000 others in January 2007. They have lived for several months in a shed so their three children, granddaughter and daughter in law could have more room in the FEMA camper. Two of their teenage sons have moved out, quit high school and gone to work. An Op-Ed featuring their tragedy, and the inequitable distribution of Katrina relief in the state --- including quotes from a protest letter composed by the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law -- was printed during the summer of 2007 in three major Alabama Sunday papers. <http://www.alarise.org/PDF/Arise%20op%20ed%20re%20Katrina%20funding%2010-29-07.pdf>.

Tommy Lee invited Junior Sprinkle, his childhood buddy, to live on his mother's property last year, where they built a small shack near the ruins of Mary Alice Lee's home. Mr. Sprinkle, homeless and ill, had lived with family in Bayou La Batre until it was demolished by the city. Junior Sprinkle was found dead this past Christmas morning.

Recently, several of us tried to visit again with Mrs. Ngieu Nguyen of Bayou La Batre. We learned from a family friend that she is now in the hospital and very ill. Mrs. Nguyen's caseworker says her **“dying wish”** is for help **“... to repair the house for her daughter to live there after she's is gone because she wants to keep her house and the land together.”** Mrs. Nguyen is not under the Mobile County Katrina CDBG jurisdiction, so like untold hundreds of others must be added to Ms. McHugh's estimate (see below).

## Katrina Devastation and Lack of Federal Relief Has Wrecked Alabama's Commercial Fisheries

Adding to the housing distress in our maritime communities, the breach [Katrina tore in Dauphin Island](#) remains unrepaired. The resultant influx of highly saline Gulf water into our bays has devastated our commercial fisheries in the Alabama bays and our section of the Mississippi Sound -- especially our oyster reefs, some of the most prolific on the Gulf Coast. Our local CBS affiliate recently reported on the crisis:

**Avery Bates, Vice President of Organized Seafood Association of Alabama says he has never seen anything like this. "...In 40 years on the water, as far as making a livelihood, I've never seen quite the disaster we've seen. It's a catastrophic failure of our shellfish industry."**

[http://www.wkrg.com/weather/article/oyster\\_problems/10012/](http://www.wkrg.com/weather/article/oyster_problems/10012/)

Thus, community elders like Lawrence and Rita Johnson of Heron Bay, who owned their oyster & crab processing shop and home outright since 1958, now face homelessness. Lawrence and Rita Johnson's home and shop were seriously damaged by Katrina. Like many others, their only available relief was an SBA loan. Their income is now wrecked -- like the oyster reefs that Lawrence Johnson helped seed with the state. They have unsuccessfully asked the SBA to give them a meaningful deferment. Please read Rita Johnson's letter below:

From: Rita F. Johnson  
(SBA Loan Number 9241504005)

To: Mrs. Alexander: (Small Business Ad. 801 Tom Martin Dr Suite 20  
Birmingham AL 35211)

In response to the letter I received around 7/29/08  
I need help with <sup>this</sup> loan, on our business.  
When we took out the loan after Katrina, we  
thought it would help get things started to  
going again and for awhile things seemed O.K.,  
then things started going down hill.  
With the economy + gas prices, one going down (economy)  
the other going up (gas) and me being 72 years old, my  
husband 74, and on Social Security, together we have  
\$1,020.00 a month.  
We have a hard time making ends meet with that  
amount, after (medicine, lights, gas, phone & SBA Loan  
Number 9241654004 for \$133.00 a month) that loan is for  
my home, which I use to own, (for 47 years) before  
Katrina, decided to visit us.  
I need help,

Rita F. Johnson  
15960 Williams Rd.  
Coden AL 36523  
(251) 873-4447

Dauphin Island, settled by the French in 1699, is a critical protective barrier island for the entire City of Mobile, it can and must be saved.

**Failure to Rebuild the Homes of the Low Income People in South Mobile County**  
**Benefits Only Developers**

We have been struggling for over three years for the right to rebuild and remain on our properties. We have come close several times in the last year through extensive grass roots lobbying to obtain some additional funding from Congress. A detailed account is given in my attached Feb. 26, 2009 letter to President Barack Obama, Governor Riley, Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu, Alabama Senator Richard Shelby, and Alabama Congressmen Jo Bonner and Artur Davis.

But too little has changed since Alabama Arise and South Bay Communities Alliance wrote our first press release regarding Fair Katrina Relief over two years ago. So it leads to the question: Who benefits if we can't rebuild?



**NEWS ADVISORY** 1/22/07

**News conference today – 2:00 pm, Mobile City Hall Atrium**

**Contact: Zack Carter, Alabama Arise (334) 832-9060**

**Jim Fuller, South Bay Community Alliance (251) 824-9700**

## **FEMA Evictions Delayed, Concerns Remain**

*Displaced residents, advocacy groups question fairness of Katrina relief and highlight related environmental issues*

BAYOU LA BATRE, AL – Nearly 2,000 Hurricane Katrina survivors in south Mobile County won 6 more months of borrowed time on Friday when President Bush pushed back a February 28 end date for FEMA trailer and rental assistance. Community activists had petitioned for a one-year postponement of the eviction deadline. A year and a half after the storm, an estimated 700 area households remain in FEMA trailers and tiny campers because federal Community Development Block Grants designated for home rebuilding have not yet been released.

**Displaced Coden residents and representatives of social justice and environmental advocacy groups will hold a news conference on the fairness of Katrina relief policies at 2:00 today at Mobile City Hall.**

Also at issue will be the new Bayou La Batre waste treatment plant, slated for construction in neighboring Coden, in a minority community within a federally designated flood zone. County and state officials have informed Coden homeowners that, in order to move back in after rebuilding, they must agree to hook up to the planned facility. An environmentally sound alternative proposal by the Mobile Area Water and Sewer System remains under consideration by state and local authorities.

The utility project is just one piece of a larger coastal development picture that worries many locals... “After the storm, my husband and I and nine other family members had to live on a shrimp boat for about a month,” Nelson says. “The first day we got back, we noticed there were flyers from developer Tim James’ s company all over people’ s houses, trailers, and even pilings of blown-away houses. The flyers asked if people wanted to sell. What the flyers should have said was „How can we help?“”

When Nelson called the number on the flyer and spoke to James, he offered to buy her family’ s several acres for \$20,000. “That property’ s been in our family for over 100 years,” Nelson says. “I told him we were not for sale.”

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As our Mobile County Commissioner co-wrote along with several advocacy groups on July 2, 2007:

**In addition to the current 1,200 CDBG applicants, there are likely hundreds of others who did not make the deadline for the CDBG applications that were distributed in January 2007. Currently about 400 families still exist in FEMA campers in Mobile County, providing shelter for as many as six people -- including children, elders, and the disabled. Many, especially since Katrina hit, also have to now exist at low levels of income. They continue to work hard and, as they have for generations, to provide the backbone of Alabama's vital seafood industry: They need a helping hand, and Alabama cannot afford to watch them pass from Katrina Survivors to Katrina Victims.**

The people of south Mobile County as the backbone of Alabama's vital seafood industry, are also the natural stewards of our marine environment, and a vibrant part of the Gulf Coast's Acadian culture.

The anthropologist Dr. John Salter, wrote:

**“French traditions dominated the culture for more than two centuries and are still a strong defining characteristic, distinguishing this portion of the Alabama and the Louisiana Gulf Coast from the rest of the United States.”** And specific to our area he wrote: **“South Mobile County, Alabama...should be evaluated for Environmental Justice concerns ... Incomes in this area are considered to be low to modest without a significant middle class....The colonial population consisted of a mixture of French, African, and Native Americans. Social and racial lines tended to be and remain somewhat blurred as a consequence of this background. ....there is a recent emergence of what locals term a “Creasian” culture resulting from the blending of the longstanding Creole and Cajun and recent Asian ethnicities.”** (Social Impact Assessment sponsored by US Coast Guard, Jan. 2005, John F. Salter, Ph.D.)

Our state, our country cannot afford to see our people displaced from their ancestral maritime communities.

Our community also reaches out in unity with our neighbors and friends some 40 miles north; in Prichard, Magazine, and Plateau; and the multicultural and multiclass neighborhoods along Dauphin Island Parkway in south Mobile who have also suffered from Katrina -- where hundreds of families have approved for Katrina CDBG rebuilding funds. However, because Alabama's requests for additional funding have thus far been rejected (see my Feb. 29 letter to President Obama, Gov, Riley, etc) they still languish without homes or in damaged and mold invested ones. (Please see attached flyers for the two tours our communities carried out last year.)

We have a Katrina CDBG program in Mobile City and County that has already been in place for almost two years and is finally making progress with repairs and rebuilding, according to the administrator's Jan. 29, 2009 letter to Alabama Arise. How can our society morally afford to no longer fund it and break a promise to hundreds of families? \$110 million is a modest request. But it would put over 1000 good and deserving families back in their homes; repair hundreds of others to a habitable state; and put many construction workers back on the job. In addition, the economic multiplier effect would be a significant stimulus to Alabama's economy.

On Dec. 1, The Mobile County Commission gave Judy Buff a, [resolution honoring Jim Fuller's advocacy](#) to bring fair Katrina assistance to our unincorporated towns. Judy and Jim were married for 29 years. Colonel Roosevelt Lewis, whose family is a pillar of the Coden community and a founder of the Tuskegee Airmen Museum, read the resolution as Jim's obituary. [The local CBS TV affiliate covered his memorial](#), and the [Mobile Press paid homage](#). I pray that his advocacy has not been in vain.