

LOUISIANA SEA GRANT ASSISTS DELCAMBRE, LA, DURING HURRICANE RECOVERY

A Town Too Smart to Die

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New Iberia also on the west bank of the Teche, and in the parish of St. Martin, is of little consequence ...” (Darby, W. 1817. A Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana. New York: James Olmstead. p. 159)



INTRODUCTION

Darby was wrong about New Iberia, and historians will record that Delcambre is not “of little consequence” but a community too smart to die. The 2005 hurricane season has become a turning point for the town and exemplifies the “bad news” and “good news” paradox within catastrophes. The “bad news” - Hurricane Rita’s storm surge devastated Delcambre coincidental to businesses closing and the younger people leaving. The “good news” – people who call Delcambre home have seized control of their destiny and are working to revitalize an economy committed to the fishing industry, while growing as a center of coastal-oriented activities which may help keep the young from moving away. Much of what happens during the next 10-20 years will result from the vision and actions of today’s volunteers as the community rebuilds in anticipation of the next hurricane or flood. True to its mission of assistance and a source of information, the Louisiana Sea Grant Program (LSGP) is participating in this recovery and rejuvenation. The following describes the LSGP involvement during these challenging times.

Figure 1: Delcambre, LA Arrow shows direction of Figure 2

HURRICANE RITA VISITS DELCAMBRE

Delcambre measures only 0.8 sq mi and counts less than 2,200 people. In spite of its small size Delcambre has always been a cross-road (Figure 1), beginning with its corporate limits overlapping into Iberia and Vermilion parishes. Culturally, Delcambre families trace their roots to Spanish land grants or French Acadians from “*Le Grand Dérangement*” (The Great Disturbance), their deportation from Canada. The economy is a mixture of agriculture, fishing, seafood processing, (Figure 2), and oil and gas services. In 2004, Delcambre was 36th in value of commercial fishery landings in the nation (Louisianaspeaks, 2006). The Delcambre Canal and Bayou Carlin (9 ft x 90 ft channel) allows “commercial fishing and navigation with an adequate access channel from Delcambre to the Gulf of Mexico” (U.S. Congress, 1945 and 1960). A 9 ft deep mooring area (1,300 ft x 200-125 ft) “provides a harbor of refuge” (U.S. Congress, 1960) for mariners. Ground transportation moves east to west on a railroad and Louisiana Highway 14, a four-lane state highway (Figure 1), both connecting to regional and state markets.

Delcambre sits on the Pleistocene terrace that is slightly uplifted and tilted to the south. Ground elevations range from three to nine feet NGVD (1929) in a town with a Base Flood Elevation of 11 ft (FEMA, 2003). The flat topography results in flooding from precipitation (FEMA, 2003). Consequently, all of Delcambre is an A-Zone or within the 100-year floodplain (Flood Insurance Rate Maps, Panel Nos. 2202230001C and 2202230002C). And watercourses that give economic life to the community contribute to its vulnerability. The Delcambre Canal and Bayou Carlin offer a direct connection to the Gulf of Mexico for the fishing and maritime interests. But these channels also shortened the path for hurricane storm surge to accelerate inland to greater depths.

In August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated southeast Louisiana and Mississippi, it caused little damage in Delcambre. Just four weeks later Hurricane Rita seemed so far west in Cameron Parish, Delcambre was surprised when a 10 ft storm surge rolled into town and across the surrounding agricultural fields. The surge flooded all but 25 of the 903 structures in the corporate limits (Wikipedia, 2006) and caused \$9.9 million in NFIP losses (239 claims) (Herrera, 2007), closing the businesses along Louisiana Highway 14 and crippling the fishing industry on the Delcambre Canal. Delcambre is now at yet another cross roads – rebuild and change for a prosperous future or continue to decline as the tax base erodes and population continues to decline.

THE PATH OF RECOVERY

In late 2005 and early 2006, Louisiana sponsored nationally acclaimed planners and experts to host meetings, conduct charettes, and develop proposals for coastal recovery, including plans for Delcambre (Louisiana Recovery Authority, 2006). But the visions depicted by outsiders did not inspire the residents. Consequently, a loose coalition of businessmen, professionals, and elected officials initiated a recovery process that was sensitive to the local culture and was directed at their needs and desires. The regional Sea Grant agent was contacted and subsequently additional Sea Grant representatives were invited to a July 2006 meeting to discuss recovery and a possible role for Sea Grant during recovery. Sea Grant offered objective, non-judgmental professional support by facilitating meetings and discussions, working with the media, inviting experts to make presentations and share ideas, and providing general support of the community. The cooperative venture has accomplished much between July 2006 and February 2007. However, most of the credit for success belongs to the volunteers because of their initiative and willingness to commit personal time and resources on behalf of their community.

To coordinate activities the initial participants created the Delcambre Town/Port Steering Committee composed of two businessmen, two lawyers, an engineer, the executive director of a nonprofit, and a councilman. To avoid conflicts and misunderstandings among parties, members of the Steering Committee meet regularly with the mayor of Delcambre, the Vermilion Parish Police Jury, the Iberia Parish Council, and the Twin Parish Port Commission. To complement these briefings, informal communications exist in a network of individuals who grew up together and have maintained contacts through church, school, and social interactions.



Figure 2: Delcambre waterfront looking North to the Hwy 14 bridge

To assist the Steering Committee organize its activities, the Louisiana Sea Grant Program drafted a Business Plan (Work Plan) (Table 1). A revised Business Plan now guides the Steering Committee. Task A is to expand the local economy by filling the niche for a working waterfront (Figure 2) supporting the fishing industry between Intracoastal City and Morgan City, LA. To be viable, the ultimate mix of uses will expand to include a canal oriented community with parks and cultural attractions, an up-dated safe harbor for fishing and recreational watercraft seeking refuge from hurricanes, and new industrial clients on vacant port property. A task leader has been identified and will invite others from the community to participate on the economic team.

Tasks B through E are in support of developing a working waterfront. Task B is to initiate a project that could generate revenues for implementing waterfront elements. The Steering Committee elected to investigate a Pilot Recreational Community that would serve the prospering Lafayette, LA, region. To avoid conflicts with the revitalized fishing industry, second homes would be built on dredged canals to the rear of the docks and industrial businesses, but on lots offering established infrastructure (gas, telephone, water, sewage, roads, electricity).

Funds are essential for implementation and Delcambre is no exception. Task C is preparing grant applications and assessing financial options such as bonds, taxes, and fees. Members of the Steering Committee are seeking grants through the Congressional delegation, the Corps of Engineers, and traditional federal and state programs. For example, the engineer has submitted an application for Wallop-Breaux funds (Public Law 98-369, approved July 18, 1984, 26 U.S.C. 1 note, 98 Stat. 502).

Although dredging the Delcambre Canal will occur (Louisiana Speaks 2006a) the recovery effort is not idle waiting for federal and state action which will take years to materialize, if ever. The Steering Committee realized they have no time to wait and are reviewing additional sources of support, such as donations of land, trading parcels, special taxes, selling concession rights (restaurants, fueling docks, fishing supplies, etc.), and cooperative endeavors among associations, the parishes, the town, and the Twin Parish Port Commission (Louisiana Municipal Association, 2005). On this task the Louisiana Sea Grant Program has identified potential funds such as the Fisheries Aid Package through the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA). The LRA will invest up to \$20 million in projects for public infrastructure benefiting fishermen by helping ensure their long-term viability. Examples of public or public-private ventures include safe harbors, docks, and ice/fuel facilities.

Task D addresses legal issues such as landownership, federal, state, and local permits, the ability of the town or port commission to undertake project activities, and contracts. The two lawyers and the engineer contribute their expertise and experience on these issues. However, Louisiana Sea Grant Legal Program is available to assist when appropriate.



Figure 3: November 20 workshop

Task E builds on the talents available from universities. The Louisiana Sea Grant Program introduced the School of Landscape Architecture, Louisiana State University, to the project. In Landscape

Architecture 5001, a Fall 2006 Studio, two students developed concepts that help locals visualize elements of recovery. Preliminary meetings with the mayor, councilmen, and potentially affected landowners described the students' project before it was officially introduced to the town council on November 13. Everyone was invited to a November 20 workshop (Figure 3) in the Catholic church hall where the students and the Steering Committee received public comments and recommendations. Television station KLFY, Channel 10, Lafayette reported the workshop as the lead story on the 10 PM news (<http://www.klfy.com/Global/story.asp?s=5681772>). University involvement increased in January 2007 when the local Sea Grant agent arranged a visit with the Director of the Community Design Workshop, School of Architecture, University of Louisiana, Lafayette (ULL). As an outcome of the meeting, ULL architecture students and perhaps the business school will be working on the Delcambre project during the next 12 months.

Finally, as a part of task F, the community will be involved through future workshops and meetings and will learn about the project through television and newspaper stories, and presentations to local organizations. To help with publicity, the local Sea Grant agent interested a regional magazine in publishing a story on the Delcambre recovery initiative. He has also appeared on the morning edition of a Lafayette television station.

**Table 1. BUSINESS PLAN (Work Plan)
DELCAMBRE TOWN/PORT STEERING
COMMITTEE**

- I. INTRODUCTION
- II. BASIC PREMISE
- III. TASKS
 - A. Identify Projects for a Long-term Economic Program and Clients for the Twin Parish Port. Make Initial Contacts.
 - 1. Team Leader and Team Members
 - 2. Specific Activities
 - 3. Products
 - 4. Schedule
 - B. Build a Pilot (Model) Recreational Community. Propose and assess ways of providing Basic Infrastructure (sewage, water, electricity, gas, roads) to the Pilot (Model) Recreational Community or Other Activities
 - C. Prepare Grant Applications and Assess Financing Options (bonds, taxes, fees)
 - D. Identify Legal Issues (landownership; Federal, state, and local permits)
 - E. Garner Assistance from Universities (Professors and students) for a Conceptual Working Waterfront within the Context of Delcambre
 - F. Public Involvement and Media
- IV. TASKS THAT MAY BE DEFERRED
- V. COMMITTEE REPORTS
- VI. PARTICIPANTS
- VII. SUPPORT
- VIII. SOURCE DOCUMENTS

SUMMARY

The National obituaries about the death of coastal Louisiana are premature. Delcambre will recover, stronger, smarter, and safer by building on volunteer leaders who donate their talents and time to set a community agenda. The Steering Committee maintains cooperation with the Town of Delcambre, Vermilion and Iberia parishes, the public, and nonprofit organizations such as the chambers of commerce, the universities, and the Shrimp Festival Association. To keep its momentum the Steering Committee meets once a month to review progress and adjust what they are doing as opportunities appear or fall by the wayside. A working waterfront can be accomplished with the rejuvenation of the fishing industry paramount, but success means partnering with a range of coastal oriented activities that will generate much needed money. Continued local commitment is essential. Louisiana Sea Grant Program is playing a key role in assisting the community as it works to recover and prove Delcambre is a town too smart to die.

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