Planning for Population Loss in Coastal Louisiana

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Introduction

In communities across south Louisiana, land loss and environmental change have accelerated migration away from coastal communities. In Terrebonne Parish, for instance, bayou communities in the southern reaches of the parish, including Chauvin, Dulac and Montegut, have lost population while communities further inland and less susceptible to storm-related flooding have expanded (LA Safe, Terrebonne Parish, 2017). Preliminary findings from Louisiana indicate that the most advantaged residents tend to relocate from coastal communities, leaving behind an increasingly poor and elderly population (Hobor and Plyer, 2014).

Communities losing population face declining tax bases, reduced economic activity, increased blight and abandonment, and fewer resources to support services and maintain infrastructure. Such conditions create a vicious circle that increases the chances of people moving out (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). But not everyone will leave. Local officials, with a dwindling tax base, must maintain the safety and quality of life for those who remain.

Population loss can create different social, physical and fiscal impacts across neighborhoods and communities (Hollander, 2010) that call for divergent planning and policy responses. Coastal and bayou communities in south Louisiana may face more or less housing abandonment, depending upon whether or not those who leave can maintain their ancestral homes and whether houses are demolished following storm damage. In some coastal communities, a declining permanent population has been accompanied by a substantial increase in second homes for recreational fishers. The proliferation of fishing camps in these formerly isolated bayou communities has potentially paradoxical effects. On the one hand, their development could support new economy activity for a coastal economy in transition, maintain needed retail for long-time residents, and sustain or even expand the local tax base as the permanent population shrinks. On the other hand, the replacement of permanent residents with a part-time population could threaten the rich tribal and Cajun heritage of these communities, increase need for infrastructure maintenance, and encourage denser development in environmental sensitive, hazard prone ecosystems.

Project Goal and Relevance

To understand the prolonged loss of the permanent population and its impacts in Louisiana's coastal communities, I propose a project conducted by a graduate research assistant in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning (MURP) program at the University of New Orleans that examines population dynamics across bayou communities in Terrebonne Parish and their physical, social and fiscal impacts. In year 1, the graduate research assistant will:

- examine change in the size, racial and ethnic composition, age structure, and poverty status of the population in Terrebonne Parish's bayou communities since 1990;
- document and examine the physical and social impacts of population change across these bayou communities; and
- identify and analyze strategies to maintain infrastructure, services, and quality of life utilized in other US communities as populations and tax bases decline.

Funding in years 2 and 3 will be used to expand this research into other coastal parishes. The MURP graduate assistant(s) will be supervised by Dr. Marla Nelson. Nelson has experience working in Terrebonne Parish's coastal communities and has published extensively on planning for declining and

slow growth communities. UNO's MURP program is the only accredited planning program in the State of Louisiana.

This research is relevant to CPRA's mission and mandate and three of the goals of the Coastal Master Plan: to promote a sustainable coastal ecosystem; to promote a working coast; and to sustain cultural heritage. This research seeks to identify the current and anticipated impacts of persistent population loss on coastal communities and the planning approaches that can be used to maintain existing infrastructure and services with a decreasing tax base. This research builds upon Nelson's project funded by the Louisiana Center of Excellence (2016-2018)--*From Adapting in Place to Adaptive Migration: Designing and Facilitating an Equitable Relocation Strategy.*

Summary of Methods and Approach

The graduate research assistant will utilize primary and secondary data to examine and compare the population dynamics and their physical, social, and fiscal impacts across bayou communities in Terrebonne Parish. The project will consist of three parts. First, the graduate research assistant will utilize data from the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey to analyze and compare change in the size, racial and ethnic composition, age structure, and poverty status of the population across Terrebonne's bayou communities.

Second, to examine the physical, social, and fiscal impacts of population change across bayou communities, the graduate research assistant will:

- conduct a visual survey of residential properties to analyze current property conditions and occupancy;
- utilize United States Postal Service (USPS) Vacant Address data available from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to examine the change in the number of residential and commercial properties and vacancy rates by census tract;
- utilize property tax records to examine change in number of residential properties, residency status (full-time vs. temporary) and assessed property values, and estimate changes in the property tax base;
- utilize school district records to examine the change in the number and location of schools and school enrollments;
- utilize business directories to examine change in the number and type of businesses; and
- interview service providers for self-assessments of service changes.

Finally, to help translate research into planning and policy recommendations, the graduate research assistant will identify innovative and collaborative strategies used in other declining communities to address fiscal constraints and maintain infrastructure and service levels. To do this, the graduate research assistant will conduct a scan of the planning and policy literature and conduct a survey of comparison communities in different regions of the United States.

References

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