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The Gulf Coast Civic Works Project is the national effort to develop federal legislation to create 100,000 jobs for Gulf Coast residents to rebuild their communities.



Monite Riley cleaning out her house as her son Nathaniel, 4, draws. New Orleans, 1/2007. Image Courtesy of Diana Diroy.

Hurricane Katrina damaged over 200,000 Gulf Coast homes. In addition, Katrina destroyed schools, hospitals, roads, community centers, bridges, parks, and forest lands. The government's response to this unprecedented disaster has been ineffective and weak. Of the 101,000 Louisianans who have applied for aid to rebuild their homes, only 257 people have received grants.

Today, the Gulf Coast is in crisis. There is an urgent need to jump-start the rebuilding process. What is needed is a "rebuilding surge" in New Orleans and in southern Mississippi.

The Gulf Coast Civic Works Project is the national effort to develop federal legislation to create 100,000 jobs for Gulf Coast residents to rebuild their communities. During the Great Depression, when the United States faced a crisis, our country created 800,000 jobs in two weeks, and 4 million jobs in two months. These public workers built or repaired 2,500 hospitals, 6,000 schools, 13,000 playgrounds, and even built the Golden Gate Bridge. They also planted 3 billion trees.

A WPA-like program rebuilt our country in the 1930s; it can do the same today for the Gulf Coast. The parameters for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project are the following:

- The civic work jobs will be in the areas of construction, plumbing, electrical, brick building, air conditioning, etc.
- If workers do not have these skills, paid apprenticeships will be provided. These skilled jobs will soon become the backbone of the middle-class.



Joseph Nance speaks at a “Louisiana Winter” rally in front of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School for Science and Technology, located in the Lower Ninth Ward. 1/2007. Image Courtesy of Diana Diroy.

- The civic work jobs will pay a living wage—no lower than \$12, and preferably \$15—so people can have enough money to feed, clothe, and house themselves.
- The civic workers will have the right to join unions.
- The local Gulf Coast residents and displaced citizens will have the first opportunity for the civic work jobs.
- The process to obtain a civic works job should be simple. A streamlined process will be conducted at county employment service offices and/or at faith-based and community initiatives connected to the White House.
- The local communities affected by Hurricane Katrina (as well as Hurricane Rita) will decide which structures will be given priority to rebuild. Some communities may focus on housing, while others focus on schools, hospitals, community centers, or parks.
- A Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)-like agency will oversee the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. This TVA-like agency will ensure transparency so that the American public knows exactly where the money is going.

The federal government, state government, and insurance companies will finance this \$3.9 billion project. The projected cost is based on a ratio of labor to materials of 80-20—which was used during the New Deal—with a wage rate of \$15 per hour. The projected cost of wages is \$3.1 billion, while the cost of materials is \$775 million. Note that

\$3.9 billion is roughly one-half the cost of the war each month in Iraq according to the Congressional Budget Office. And while the Iraq War has been plagued with graft and corruption, similar large-scale public works projects have operated in the United States with little or no corruption.

Importantly, the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project will not only rebuild homes, but it will also rebuild individual lives. There is a sense of hopelessness in many residents. Sadly, this lack of hope has already cost the lives of too many elderly, since some seniors lost the will to live in the face of such limited rebuilding.

The youth have also been impacted, as their sense of community has been destroyed, and they literally have no place to play since their parks and community centers have been destroyed. By having Gulf Coast residents rebuild their own communities, the people will regain their sense of empowerment and hope, and see that a better future is possible.



Students from San Jose State University speak with Pass Christian residents during "Louisiana Winter." 1/2007. Image Courtesy of Diana Diroy.

The Gulf Coast Civic Works Project can also repair the frayed social compact between the government and citizen. As citizens, we have various responsibilities (e.g., pay taxes, sit on juries, and serve our country), while at the same time the government has responsibilities, and one of them is to respond effectively when its citizens are in crisis. Passing federal legislation to implement the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project will be a major step in repairing the social compact that is so badly damaged.

In order to encourage Congress to develop and pass a bill based on the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, a group of over 100 college



Louisiana Winter students and Dr. Scott Myers-Lipton talking with Rev. Willie Walker during a town hall meeting in New Orleans. 1/2007. Image Courtesy of Diana Diroy.

students from 15 universities spent the past week in New Orleans and Mississippi.

This week-long student campaign, which was entitled “Louisiana Winter,” was inspired by a previous generation of college students who came to the Gulf Coast to register African American voters during “Mississippi Freedom Summer” in 1964.

Louisiana Winter students traveled throughout New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where they passed out 10,000 fliers, held two rallies, conducted two town hall meetings, gave multiple interviews to local, state, and international media, and perhaps most importantly, asked Gulf Coast residents for their opinions about what they wanted to see included in the Civic Works legislation. The responses given to the students served as a guideline for the parameters outlined earlier.



1/2007. Image Courtesy of Diana Diroy.

Everywhere the Louisiana Winter students went, they were greeted warmly, whether it was in Gentilly, Pontchartrain Park, Lower Ninth Ward, Uptown, or St. Bernard Parish in New Orleans, or whether it was in Gulfport, Pass Christian, Long Beach, or Biloxi in Mississippi. And perhaps even more importantly, the idea for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project was seen as a potential solution by almost everyone the students met. In fact, support for the Civic Works Project cut across political orientation, as conservatives saw it as a hand-up and not a handout, while liberals appreciated the fact that the government would play an active role in relieving the social suffering.

Importantly, both conservatives and liberals felt that the federal government had not lived up to its responsibility of taking care of

its people, and overwhelmingly supported the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project as a way to rebuild their communities. Clearly, this is not a Democratic or Republican idea, but an American solution.



Support for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project is already growing. Color of Change, a human-rights organization, has generated over 10,000 letters to Congress urging them to implement a Civic Works bill. Congress members Bennie Thompson, Zoe Lofgren, and Barbara Lee have all expressed interest in the idea. In fact, Congressman Thompson has said he has “considerable enthusiasm” for the Civic Works Project and sees it as a model for how to rebuild the Gulf Coast.

Currently, no member of Congress has introduced federal legislation based on the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. In order to encourage Congress to act, we will announce next week the next phase of our movement to introduce and pass federal legislation for 100,000 civic work jobs.

Here are some of the ideas currently being discussed:

1. an on-line and off-line petition drive,
2. a nation-wide Teach-in and Plan of Action” to be coordinated with Xavier and Tulane Universities in early April,
3. a 3-5 city speaking tour entitled “Civic Healing” with star-quality speakers,
4. an appeal to city councils and state legislatures to pass non-binding resolutions in support of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project.

Sixty-eight years ago, Langston Hughes said, “O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, and yet I swear this oath—America will be.” Let us work together to make America be. Let the American people demand that Congress rebuild the Gulf Coast utilizing proven methods that will get things done.



On January 16, Dr. Cornel West, one of the leading thinkers in the country today on the issues of race and democracy, met with the Louisiana Winter students at Tulane University, and fully endorsed the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. Dr. West stated that, "I am one-hundred and twenty percent behind you" and that he wanted to be of service in any way he could be. Image Courtesy of Diana Diroy.

