

Half of East Biloxi's Land Remains Vacant Over Five Years After Katrina

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BILOXI, MS – Approximately half of East Biloxi's land remains vacant over five years after Hurricane Katrina. That is according to data released today from a parcel-by-parcel survey of East Biloxi conducted by the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio earlier this year.

“Vacant land is a continuing legacy of Katrina for East Biloxi,” said Stephen Crim, a community planner on the Studio's staff and the leader of the 2010 survey.

The survey, which has always focused on East Biloxi's residential neighborhoods, found approximately 350 more parcels with completed homes than it did in its last survey from 2008. An additional 68 homes were in some state of active repair when studio staff were collecting data between this past March and May.

However, much of the low-lying peninsula remains a patchwork of grassy fields cut by streets and slabs where buildings once stood. According to the Studio, of the parcels that likely had homes prior to Katrina (it is not always possible to say what was on vacant lots beforehand), 1,528 were vacant. That represents approximately 49.4% of the parcels or 54.2% of the land area. If one includes all of the property surveyed (including that used for stores, churches, and so on), 44.0% of the study area's land was vacant.

Table 1: Condition of Residential Properties in East Biloxi. 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010*

	2006	Change from 2006 to 2007	2007	Change from 2007 to 2008	2008	Change from 2008 to 2010	2010
Vacant Lots	1174	40%	1642	3%	1698	-10%	1528
Vacant Buildings	330	-49%	169	66%	280	-53%	132
Buildings Being Repaired	935	-51%	462	-41%	272	-75%	68
Completed Buildings	145	471%	828	21%	1002	36%	1362

*Total counts of residential parcels changes from year to year due to usual re-divisions of land and because the 2010 survey excluded some parcels from the “residential” count that were mistakenly included in prior years. The 2006 survey had a slightly different study area than those in 2007, 2008, and 2010

Crim and his colleagues are hoping to find grant funding that will allow them to research the story of what has happened to each now-vacant parcel of land since Katrina.

“There are all sorts of anecdotal reasons we can cite to explain why vacancy persists,” he continued. “There's the high cost of insuring property in East Biloxi's floodplain, the activity of speculators who might still be waiting for a windfall through purchase by a casino or high-rise condominium developer, and the continued weakness in housing markets around the nation.”

Figuring out why land has remained vacant could be helpful in developing policies, programs, and strategies to re-use that land, he said.

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"Some of it could certainly still be used for housing," said Crim. According to the Studio's analysis, about 35.3% of the of all the vacant land in East Biloxi, or nearly 200 acres, is land that would require no more than 6 feet of elevation above the ground in order to be in compliance with FEMA and National Flood Insurance Program. That is a height range that, in the Studio's experience of designing elevated housing, is much more reasonable in terms of cost.

For its part, the Studio will continue offering design services to families and individuals still seeking to rebuild in East Biloxi through the region's housing resource centers. "We don't know yet how many land owners in the neighborhood have applied for or will receive assistance from the Neighborhood Home program announced in November, but it is possible that our next survey will show changes to East Biloxi's landscape that are a direct result of that assistance," Crim continued.

As far as the rest of the vacant land, while the Studio does not have a master plan for what the neighborhood should or could look like in the coming years, it does support the general suggestions offered in the comprehensive plan that the City of Biloxi adopted in 2009. It wants to support projects that put the land made vacant by Katrina to other use, including restored wetlands and other natural habitat.

Crim ended by underlining the progress that has been made towards rebuilding homes over the past two years. In 2008, the survey found 280 parcels with homes that were in some state of disrepair and which appeared unoccupied. In 2010 it found only 132. The FEMA trailers that were once so common in the neighborhood were gone as well, as were most of the MEMA cottages.

"Countless volunteers and organizations deserve applause for their work to rebuild housing around this neighborhood, and the information we have gathered does show slow, continued rebuilding," added Crim.

The studio, which is a nonprofit research arm of the College of Architecture, Art & Design at Mississippi State University, collected data for the survey from February to May of 2010. This is the fourth East Biloxi survey that the Studio has undertaken since Hurricane Katrina.