

“Rebuilding, Reinvesting”*By: Nathan Crace Date: October 20, 2005*

Two months in a row. Two months writing columns in the wake of enormous hurricanes. First Katrina. Then Rita. Now, as I write this month's column, hurricane Wilma is battering the Yucatan Peninsula before expecting to turn northeast and set her sights on Florida. But at 11:30 at night watching satellite images of the storm hovering just south of the Gulf of Mexico and southwest of Cuba, I cannot help but notice that she has thus far moved west and northwest—a track seemingly too easily able to continue over Cancun and northward to the Louisiana/Mississippi Gulf Coast. Hopefully the forecasters, much more learned than I, are correct about a pending cold front “picking up” Wilma and moving her to the northeast. Not to say that I want our friends in Florida to take another one for the team—they've had six hurricanes make landfall in the past two seasons—but after seeing what's left of our coast, another storm like Katrina or Rita could prove apocalyptic.

Just yesterday, I held a telephone interview with a business publication about my thoughts on rebuilding golf on the Coast. It's difficult to believe that it's been nearly two months since Katrina made landfall and turned normal life into a test of survival for people from New Orleans to Meridan. Yet here we were discussing golf on the Coast. I couldn't help but think that there were still casino barges sitting north of US Highway 90, entire neighborhoods wiped clean, thousands of people without homes and a number of people still missing. Not that you would have known it by watching the national media coverage of the storm's aftermath in the weeks after the hurricane. But each day, more signs of life are seen from Waveland to Pascagoula. Not necessarily normal, but improving. Which brings me to my point.

As the interviewer and I discussed during a forty-five minute conversation, bold and aggressive plans are in the works for rebuilding the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Kudos to Governor Barbour and other leaders for getting the ball rolling early on the proper planning by bringing together some of the brightest minds in urban design, planning, and community development to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. With the proper planning—the operative word being proper—we could see the Mississippi Gulf Coast rise from the destruction as one of the premier tourist destinations and places to live in the country.

Turning back to the interview, it was difficult to think about the golf courses that would need renovation work now and the new courses sure to come to the Coast as developers pour investment dollars into the economy when images of antebellum homes swept from their foundation with nothing left but stark doorsteps and first-hand accounts of loved ones pulled from their family member's arms by the tidal surge still haunted me. Yet the employees of golf courses have families to feed and mortgages to pay too. Golf courses are businesses like any restaurant, retail shop, or dental practice. And like these other businesses, the owners of these courses will likely re-build and re-open. In fact, most are at least partially open and slated to be operational by the first of the year. Lodging for snowbirds may be another matter.

So we continue to field calls in our office from those looking to rebuild and those looking to invest while wondering “how soon is too soon” for golf when people's homes are damaged and missing. I have no doubt that the new Mississippi Gulf Coast will be the gem of coastal tourism. Not for sparkling blue waters. But in two to three years, I feel that we will see in Mississippi's coastal counties the beginnings of what could potentially be the next Myrtle Beach with the added attraction that the Grand Strand does not have—casino gaming. I look forward to the possibility of helping this transformation take place through rebuilding and reinvesting. After all, it's my Coast too—if only at heart.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance “Lipouts” column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know.