

THE FINALSAY

A.J. HOLLOWAY

MAYOR OF BILOXI

photo courtesy **City of Biloxi**

I'm delighted to be having *The Final Say* in *South Mississippi Living*.

So often, my colleagues in public policy across the Coast use this space, with good reason, to extol the progress we've made in the Katrina rebuilding efforts.

I, too, am proud of the progress that we're making in Biloxi — averaging \$4 million in commercial and residential construction permits a week, breaking ground in a matter of weeks on the new Visitors Center north of Biloxi Lighthouse, and later this year on the new downtown library and cultural center, a new center for our Public Works Department and a new fire station for the North Bay area.

We're certainly well aware of the chilling impact of the national economy, but at the same time we realize that we have a tremendous influx of federal assistance to undertake the massive program of public works that my fellow leaders and I speak about so often.

While we have made much progress, we are frustrated with how time-consuming the process has been and continues to be to.

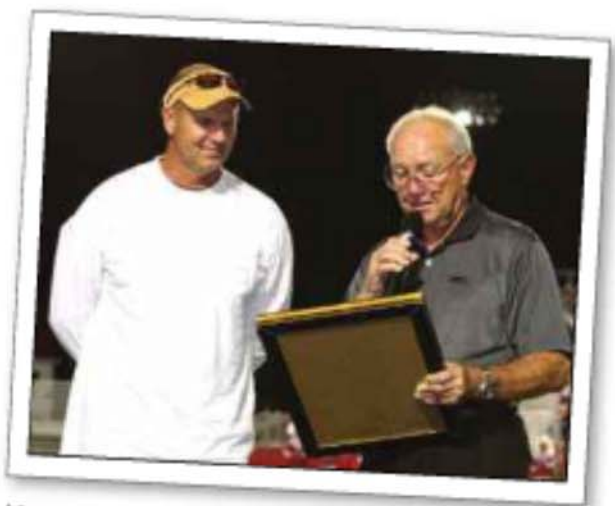
But having said all of those things, I'd like to speak on another issue, one that we should all appreciate and one that we should all remember.

This ongoing rebuilding process — the agonizing delays and revisions, the political squabbles, and the frustrations and uncertainties we face from time to time — are an innate part of the process when you're undertaking such huge and unprecedented endeavors in a public and accountable fashion.

I am pleased to report that through it all, our visitors from across the country and our well-wishers from around the globe are discovering something fascinating.

Despite all of our challenges and foibles, despite all of the policy debates we've had and will have, we're introducing ourselves to a huge audience and leaving them with positive perceptions.

Biloxi, the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the entire state, are gaining a new level of appreciation and admiration from those who come in contact with us, either in person or online.



Mayor A.J. Holloway presents sculptor Marlin Miller an award at halftime of a local high school football game. Miller, of Fort Walton Beach, FL, has created more than a dozen sculptures from standing dead trees in the Biloxi medians along Highway 90.

Everyone, residents and visitors alike, knows the story of our Katrina sculptures the project that became reality in Biloxi and has since spread to other cities along the Coast. Our initial work, where we paid a Mississippi-born chainsaw artist to sculpt a few marine figures from some standing dead oaks west of the Biloxi Lighthouse, caught the attention of a tree sculptor from Fort Walton Beach.

Marlin Miller contacted me about creating a few sculptures to show appreciation for the efforts of our residents who helped his community after Hurricane Ivan. (Again, there's our character and compassion coming through, even before Katrina.)

Marlin's work in Biloxi, which went from a handful of sculptures to nearly two dozen, led to him donating his time and talent to similar projects in cities such as Pass Christian and Long Beach.

The true gift of Marlin's work should not be the impact these new landmarks have on our landscape, but the mark they leave in our hearts — the things that we learn about ourselves as relayed from those we encounter and influence in our daily journey.

I would like to leave you with some thoughts Marlin shared with us in a recent e-mail. Remember these impressions and let them guide you as we move forward:

"It has now been a little over a year since this project began. It started out as you giving me the opportunity to be a part of a rebuild story. It was a chance for me to make a mark on the Mississippi Coast. Over this past year I have had thousands of people come up to me and tell me their story. I see now that this project was never about the artist....it was about the people of this Coast. They are to be thanked. Their grace gave me the inspiration and will to continue. I was just God's tool. I only wish I could have done more."