



The Popp's Ferry Road Proposal

Making the case for building a satisfactory emergency evacuation route to serve tens of thousands of residents and visitors

March 2004

Community Profile

Biloxi, Mississippi is located in Harrison County on the Mississippi Gulf Coast between Mobile, Alabama and New Orleans, Louisiana. Biloxi is home to 50,000+ residents and Keesler Air Force Base. Biloxi is the key Mississippi Gulf Coast destination for some 10-to-12 million tourists annually. On any given day, Biloxi is said to have as many as 300,000 people within its boundaries.

Hurricanes and Natural Disasters

Biloxi is highly susceptible to hurricanes, tropical storms and tornadoes. Since 1901, Biloxi has been victimized by 10 hurricanes. Eight of the 10 were direct hits. Included among seven hurricanes (since 1965) was Hurricane Camille, a storm that recorded winds exceeding 200 mph and a storm surge of up to 30 feet. The hurricane was the most intense to ever make landfall in the mainland United States. Mass evacuation is not uncommon in Biloxi.

Technological Hazards

Intermodal transportation routes including Interstate 10, the Back Bay of Biloxi and the CSX Railroad carry tons of hazardous materials through major concentrations of people by truck, barge and rail. In the event of a hazardous materials incident, large scale evacuation will be necessary to protect the lives of tens of thousands of Biloxi residents and visitors.

The Problem

Biloxi – with its vulnerability to hurricanes, tropical storms, tornadoes and hazardous materials – faces the risks associated with woefully inadequate emergency evacuation routes to the north. The City of 50,000+ and literally tens of thousands of tourists spans a length of 10 miles along the Gulf beachfront and has only one viable mass emergency evacuation route – Interstate 110, a four-lane north-south route in east Biloxi.

It is likely that more than 108,000 vehicles would be evacuated during the most severe hurricane conditions. Existing evacuation routes cannot handle the volume.

On an average day, almost 20,000 vehicles cross the Popp's Ferry Bridge, the main north-south artery in west Biloxi. Traffic comes to a standstill an average of 10 times a day when the drawbridge is raised for marine traffic. This situation is a step away from disaster. Records show that the draw on the two-lane bridge was raised 23 times in one 24-hour period, on the eve of Tropical Storm Isidore, a time when an increasing number of motorists were trying to cross the bridge. Those 23 openings were for extended periods since more than 345 vessels passed through the raised draw during the pre-Isidore evacuation. All the while, motorists were stalled on the bridge, and the situation could have become even worse had one of the dozens of marine vessels navigating the low and narrow draw struck the bridge during this period.

The Solution

Popp's Ferry Road, recently improved by the City of Biloxi at a cost of some \$27.4 million, offers a second potential evacuation route. Traffic flow on the newly widened roadway is inhibited by a narrow and low elevation two-lane drawbridge across the Back Bay of Biloxi.

The improvement of Popp's Ferry will provide a suitable mass evacuation route for residents and visitors. The solution involves the following at an estimated cost of \$55 to \$60 million:

- Connection of Popp's Ferry Road to U.S. 90 via a five-lane roadway
- Making optimum use of a widened Popp's Ferry Road north of the bridge
- Construction of a new bridge across the Back Bay of Biloxi (may utilize portions of the existing bridge)
- Traffic signalization and landscaping



▲ Traffic comes to a standstill an average of 10 times a day when the Popp's Ferry Bridge opens for marine traffic. Top photo shows a recent mid-afternoon weekday opening of four minutes, and center photo is a view of the existing draw. This situation is a recipe for disaster in times of evacuation. For instance, the bridge had to open hourly and for longer durations on the eve of TS Isidore, when 345 vessels passed through the low and narrow draw.

◀ The Interstate 110 drawbridge in east Biloxi was closed to traffic for weeks after being struck by a barge in 1999. The only Biloxi emergency route to the north was an inferior route – Popp's Ferry Road.

Interagency Support

Making Popp's Ferry a viable emergency evacuation route has the support of federal, state and local agencies involved in hazard mitigation planning and emergency operations before, during and after hurricanes and other disasters. The following agencies, among others, recognize the critical need to improve Popp's Ferry and support efforts to fund the project.

- U.S. Coast Guard
- Keesler Air Force Base
- Harrison County Board of Supervisors
- Harrison County Sheriff's Department
- Harrison County Civil Defense
- Biloxi Civil Defense
- American Medical Response
- MS Emergency Management Agency
- MS Highway Safety Patrol
- MS Legislative Delegation
- Gulf Regional Planning Commission
- Biloxi Fire Department
- Biloxi Police Department

Project Benefits

The extension of Popp's Ferry Road from Pass Road to U.S. 90 and replacement of the narrow low-lying drawbridge will provide the following benefits, among others:

- Enhanced northbound movement of residents of Biloxi, east Gulfport, and tens of thousands of tourists during mass evacuation resulting from hurricanes and/or other disaster events.
- Enhanced movement of traffic on a daily basis.
- Enhanced movement of waterborne traffic through the Bay of Biloxi, under the new Popp's Ferry Bridge, and into the Harrison County Industrial Seaway.
- Enhanced return to normalcy after mass evacuation. With the improved roadway and bridge, evacuees will return home and to work sooner rather than later.
- Enhanced overall emergency operations before, during, and after hurricanes and other disasters.
- Enhanced access for fire, police, ambulance, and other agencies involved in emergency operations.

Consistency with Hazard Mitigation Planning

The Harrison County Hazard Mitigation and Flood Protection Plan clearly points to the critical need to protect tens of thousands by enhancing emergency evacuation routes. The Plan states:

"Because they are so critical to evacuation of the coastal area in the event of a hurricane, evacuation routes and bridges crossing bays and areas affected by storm tides are considered critical facilities... A peninsula, the City of Biloxi is dependent upon the bridges for evacuation to the east and north... Any incident that closes one of the bridges or highways, severely affects emergency services and the flow of traffic... In recent years, the impact of closure of one or more of those major transportation facilities has been felt. The Back Bay Bridge, the major link connecting Biloxi via I-110 to Interstate 10, was struck by a barge in the summer of 1999 resulting in closure of the bridge to heavy vehicle traffic for several weeks while repairs were made. With only one lane open, traffic moving across the bridge was severely curtailed. The hazard it created involved more than inconvenience because all major medical facilities in the eastern portion of the county are located south of the bay. Delays in reaching or delivering patients in need of emergency, life-saving care put a strain on ambulances services and emergency care providers and severely endangered persons in need of emergency medical care."

The City of Biloxi has one of only a handful of Federal Emergency Management Agency approved Hazard Mitigation Plans. Improvement of emergency mass evacuations by making Popp's Ferry a viable evacuation route is a principal goal of the Plan. The Biloxi Hazard Mitigation/Floodplain Management Plan states:

"Among the most significant concerns of mitigation planners is the inadequacy of existing roadways for mass evacuation of people to the north. Evacuation routes to the north are severely limited in number and traffic carrying capacity. For those Biloxi residents and visitors who are south of the Bay of Biloxi, only two roadways cross the Bay in Biloxi. Interstate 110 and Popp's Ferry Road are available for evacuation purposes. Interstate 110 with two lanes available to the north can carry large volumes of traffic, while Popp's Ferry is a narrow two lane road with very limited capacity and should only be used by those who are familiar with the local roadway system."

The Gulf Regional Planning Commission's 2025 Gulf Coast Long Range Transportation Plan clearly points to the need for improving Popp's Ferry and connecting the north-south route to U.S. Highway 90.

Emergency Evacuation Routes

LEGEND

— Evacuation Route



Biloxi, Mississippi

- Population: 50,644
- Miles of beachfront: 10
- Visitors annually: 10-12 million
- Home of Keesler Air Force Base
- Home of 10 casino resorts employing over 15,000 people
- 1 satisfactory north-south emergency evacuation route

Mayor A.J. Holloway and the Biloxi City Council

George Lawrence • Eric Dickey
Jim Compton • Charles T. Harrison Jr.
Tom Wall • Mike Fitzpatrick • David Fayard

Find more information on the Popp's Ferry Road Proposal at <http://biloxi.ms.us>.

