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# *Economic Development*

## **TOURISM**

**Chairman: Gavin Schmidt**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the Tourism Committee is to make recommendations for reviving the tourist industry in the Biloxi area.

In the months following the hurricane, the tourism industry was boosted by a bill passed by the Mississippi Legislature to allow the casino industry to rebuild their casinos on land within 800 feet of the water. By the end of the year, three casinos had reopened and were producing over 70% of the gaming revenue compared to the prior year period.

The success of the tourism industry will depend on restoring the unique, historic attractions and events that existed prior to the hurricane, restoring and expanding the convention space, and restoring and expanding the City's marinas and piers. The City will also need to streamline the development process to be ready for the influx of new projects that will replace destroyed properties. In addition to restoring the amenities that were lost during the



hurricane, the City must explore new opportunities that can draw more visitors to Biloxi and elevate the Mississippi Gulf Coast to one of the top tourist destinations in the country. The Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal set as its primary tourism goal to establish South Mississippi as a Tier 1 tourism destination. Biloxi, as the primary gaming center of South Mississippi and home to the majority of hotels, the Mississippi Coast Coliseum

and Convention Center and many other attractions, will be the centerpiece of this effort.

### Recommendations

71. *Replace, restore or repair the City's historic sites and attractions to provide tourists with a unique experience. Many of the museums and historical sites have shown an interest in working together and sharing*

*resources as they proceed through*

*the rebuilding process. The City of Biloxi should encourage and support this process through the creation of a "Biloxi Historic Village" area at the Tullis Manor and Ohr-O'Keefe Museum site and the creation of a "Lighthouse Village" at the lighthouse. The "Biloxi Historic Village" concept would include relocating the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum, the Golden Fisherman, replicas of houses that surrounded the old seafood factories on Point Cadet to the site of the Tullis Manor along with retail shops and restaurants. This area would create a synergy that would give tourists multiple attractions to visit at the same site. The "Lighthouse Village" concept would include a replica of the Light Keeper's Cottage to house the Visitor's Center and the Chamber of Commerce, the relocation of the Mardi Gras Museum to that area, and the creation of green space around the lighthouse. The creation of this area would showcase the Biloxi Lighthouse which is the most recognizable icon*



ABOVE: Mary Mahoney's Restaurant, a Gulf Coast landmark, was built during the French occupation of the coast. The restaurant was opened in 1964 as the Old French House Restaurant. The exact date it was built is not known, but it is thought to date at around 1737. It has been featured as "Biloxi's Oldest House" in *National Geographic* magazine and many newspaper articles over the years.

on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. It would also give tourists the opportunity to tour the Biloxi Lighthouse, Mardi Gras Museum, and the Visitor's Center in one convenient stop.

72. *Work with local attractions to create a marketing program funded by a 1% food and beverage tax. The "Biloxi Heritage Parkway" program would market attractions such as Beauvoir and the Botanical Gardens, Biloxi Lighthouse, Mardi Gras Museum, Visitor's Center, West End Fire Co. Museum, Town Green, Katrina Memorial, Ohr-O'Keefe Museum, Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum, J. L. Scott Aquarium, Point Cadet Marina, and the Old Brick House. Biloxi has a long history of festivals and special events that have attracted tourists to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The Blessing of the Fleet, Mardi Gras, the Seafood Festival, Ohr Festival, Gulf Coast Wooden Boat Show, Mississippi Gulf coast Billfish Classic, Cruisin' the Coast, and Smokin' the Sound have been a major part of the tourism industry in Biloxi, and the City of Biloxi should encourage and support the revival of these great tourism events that are unique to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.*

Funding for the restoration of cultural and historical tourism attractions and events could be accomplished through a 1% tax on food and beverages in Harrison County. The City of Biloxi could request the State legislature to designate that a 1% tax on food and beverages be allocated to each city in Harrison County for the restoration of tourism attractions in their respective cities. This tax could expire after a reasonable period that would give the attractions an opportunity to rebuild and gain operational stability.

73. *Expand the Point Cadet Marina and create a Waterfront area attraction, funded grants from the Tidelands Trust Fund or bonds repaid by leases. The City of Biloxi should expand the Point Cadet Marina east to the new Biloxi Bay Bridge and create a waterfront area with restaurants, shops, and outdoor entertainment venues that will attract tourists. This new marina expansion should include boat*

slips ranging from 40 feet to 100 feet, space dedicated to restaurants and retail shops, and a central area to conduct public events. The waterfront area should also include a concrete walkway that could eventually wrap around the Biloxi peninsula. This walkway would create a walking path for tourists to travel between the attractions in the Point Cadet area. The marina should also provide tourists with scenic views of Deer Island and the harbor boat traffic, as well as, showcase the natural beauty of the waterfront area. The Point Cadet Marina and waterfront area should be designed for holding public events such as boat shows, fishing tournaments, and outdoor concerts. This “Window to the Gulf” in East Biloxi is extremely under utilized and Point Cadet has the potential to be a world class marina offering citizens and the tourism market a new experience in Biloxi.

Funding for this project could include grants from the Tidelands Trust Fund. Also, the City could consider issuing bonds which could be repaid by slip rentals and leases from restaurants and retail shops.



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74. *Build fishing reefs using debris from the Biloxi Bay Bridge and old fishing bridge.* Many of the fishing reefs in the Mississippi Sound were damaged by the hurricane. The City of Biloxi should work with private and other governmental entities to encourage the building of fishing reefs in the Mississippi Sound by using the debris from the Biloxi Bay Bridge and the old Biloxi fishing bridge. These new fishing reefs will help ensure the stability of the sport fishing industry in Biloxi.
75. *Expedite the process for approving and permitting project proposals.* The private sector will be the most important force in the successful recovery of the tourism industry in Biloxi, and their investment will create a great tax base for the City. The federal government passed legislation that offers huge financial incentives for developers to invest in Biloxi, and the City needs to create a system of authorizing projects that will expedite the approval process. The City should consider allowing developers to use outside engineers that are pre-approved by the City to help move projects through the planning process in a more expeditious manner. The costs for those outside engineers would be passed on to the developers choosing to use that process. The City Community Development Department must be able to show developers that new developments can be planned, approved, and built within the time constraints of the GO Zone Legislation passed by the federal government. The City Planning Department should also encourage developers to design their projects to be consistent with Biloxi's historical and cultural architecture.
76. *Zone East Biloxi and downtown Biloxi for mixed use and create TIF Bond Districts.* Mixed use zoning will allow tourism amenities and housing for workers in the tourism industry to be developed together. The City should also consider establishing TIF Bond Districts in East Biloxi to encourage specific types of development in that area.

77. *Revise the City's parking requirements for Condotels. A "condotel" is a unit in a condominium building that can be used as a condominium or as a hotel room. Condotels will be beneficial to the tourism industry because in many cases they will be replacing hotel rooms that were lost in the hurricane. Currently, the condominium ordinance requires each lockout to be treated as a separate unit for parking requirements. The City should revise the parking requirements for condotels to allow one parking space for units less than 1,000 square feet and two parking spaces for units that are greater than or equal to 1,000 square feet.*
78. *Support and encourage immediate expansion of the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center and create a "Convention Center District." In 2005, the citizens of Harrison County voted in favor of a bond issue to expand and renovate the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center. Since the hurricane, the expansion of the convention center has been placed on hold. The City of Biloxi should support and encourage the immediate expansion of the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center so it will be completed when the major hotels begin operating again. Also, the City should create a "Convention Center District" around the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center. This district which would encompass all of the hotels in West Biloxi should include a transportation system that would allow convention attendees to conveniently move from the hotels to the convention center.*
79. *Determine feasibility of an East Biloxi Convention Center. The casinos in East Biloxi include over 4,000 hotel rooms and more hotel development in that area is planned for the future. The City of Biloxi should study the feasibility of an East Biloxi Convention Center that would be in close proximity to the hotel room development in that area. The East Biloxi Convention Center could be a public, a private, or a public/private partnership; and*

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it could also serve as a multipurpose facility that could also host small sporting events, entertainment, or community events.

80. *Extend hotel tax to include condotels.* The convention business in Biloxi is supported by a tax on hotel rooms. The funds generated from this tax directly support the expansion of the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center and the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention and Visitor Bureau's efforts to attract conventions to Biloxi. Many of the hotel rooms that help generate that tax in Biloxi were destroyed by the hurricane, and will be replaced by new developments that will operate as a condotel. It is imperative that the City of Biloxi take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the hotel tax is applied to a condotel unit or any unit that is rented by the owner of the unit.
81. *Commit property in East Biloxi for a privately developed minor league baseball stadium.* Professional minor league baseball has been discussed in Biloxi over the past 10 years, and now is the time to make it happen. The City of Biloxi should commit enough property in East Biloxi for a developer to build a minor league baseball stadium complex. A minor league baseball team will attract additional tourists to the City and add excitement for residents. The timeliness of this land commitment is important because of the window of opportunity for a developer to take advantage of the GOZone legislation. A developer is currently interested in purchasing a team with the intent of building a minor league stadium complex and moving the team to Biloxi. The City's major contribution to this project is to commit the land where the complex would be built. East Biloxi is the best place for the complex because of the easy access to I-110, hotel rooms, major resorts, and condominium projects that will be in East Biloxi. The Governor's Commissions Final Report recommends the creation of one major sports attraction in South Mississippi.

82. *Work with CTA to create a "Park Once" transportation systems for tourists.* A transportation system that would allow tourists to park once and be able to access transportation to all of the City's casinos and attractions would enhance the tourism experience in Biloxi. It would also benefit residents by taking vehicles off local roads.
  
83. *Replace the H-tract connector route.* The City of Biloxi should request that MDOT replace the H-tract connector route with the extension of the Woolmarket exit to Popp's Ferry Road at Jam Lane, a new four (4) lane Popp's Ferry bridge, and the extension of Popp's Ferry Road to Highway 90. It is important that tourists are able to easily access the tourism areas in West Biloxi, and this plan would be able to be completed quicker and less expensive than the H-tract connector route. The proposed H connector will also adversely affect Keesler Air Force Base housing plans.