

Transportation/HUD Appropriations, Fiscal Year 2008

Amendment XXX – Requires that the housing needs of all Louisiana residents displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are met before spending money to design or construct a Wetland Center in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

S. 1789, the Fiscal Year 2008 appropriations bill for the Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development (T-HUD) and Related Agencies, includes a provision directing \$400,000 to establish “America’s Wetland Center” in Lake Charles, LA to increase public awareness of the national importance of sustainable wetlands conservation, preservation and restoration.

While a wetland center may provide a welcoming source of educational information and entertainment for tourists and others visiting the area, such a center is not essential, especially when thousands of Louisiana residents are still struggling to recover from the damage caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

This amendment is about setting priorities.

It would simply require that the housing needs of Louisiana residents who lost their homes be met before federal dollars are spent to design or construct a wetland center.

The amendment does not prohibit funding for the wetland center, but rather delays spending any federal funds on the project until each Louisiana resident displaced by Hurricane’s Katrina and Rita has been provided stable housing.

This would be certified by the Secretary of the Army, in consultation with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), and the state of Louisiana.

Background on America's Wetland Center

According to the City of Lake Charles website, the proposed "America's Wetlands Discovery Center" is planned to be a 56,000-square-foot center and would be built at a cost of \$16 million in two phases. The center will take approximately three years to construct.¹

The center will feature a boardwalk entranceway built over the edge of the lake, a lobby/orientation center providing visitor information and enlarged images of Louisiana's waterways, swamps and coastal marshes. Exhibits include an interactive river water table, large-scale marsh habitats and an interactive kitchen showcasing products from America's wetlands. The center will also feature a "Wetlands Immersion Theater."

According to the city's website, Lake Charles Mayor Randy Roach reported preliminary estimates of 270,000 annual visitors to the center, and said the center will help give Lake Charles an enhanced national image for helping to address the growing wetland conservation problem.²

¹ <http://www.cityoflakecharles.com/depts/DDA/wetlands.asp>

² <http://www.cityoflakecharles.com/depts/DDA/wetlands.asp>



*America's Wetland Discovery Center Program and Master Plan*³

Tens of Thousands of Louisiana Residents Still Lack Housing

Hurricane Katrina was the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States. More than 1.5 million people were directly affected and more than 800,000 people were forced to live outside of their homes as a result of the storm and its aftermath.^[1]

The inhabitants of about 87,000 households from Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama now reside in travel trailers and mobile homes. In addition, the residents of about 33,000 households still rely on federal housing subsidies in cities including Houston and Atlanta.^[2]

³ <http://www.cityoflakecharles.com/depts/DDA/forms/presentation.pdf>

^[1] Department of Homeland Security, "The 18-Month Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina - Progress Made and Lessons Learned," March 6, 2007, http://www.dhs.gov/xprevprot/programs/gc_1173201764934.shtm

^[2] Cain Burdeau. "Housing aid for Katrina, Rita victims will go to '09," Associated Press, April 27, 2007.

The federal government recently announced that it will spend another \$1 billion to provide housing for more than 100,000 victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita through March 2009.^[3]

“The availability and affordability of housing in parts of metropolitan New Orleans continues to be a thorn in the side of the area’s recovery more than 20 months after Hurricane Katrina,” according to *The Advocate*, a Louisiana newspaper.^[4]

The cost to rent an apartment has increased dramatically in metro New Orleans, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reports. A two-bedroom apartment costing \$676 a month before Katrina, for example, now costs \$978— a 45 percent increase.^[5]

Most blacks in New Orleans (56 percent) reported problems with housing costs since the storm, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation said published on May 10, 2007. The study found that 42 percent of whites complained of similar problems. Kaiser conducted the study from September to November 2006.^[6]

The government is paying rent for Debbie Holmes, who also assists the homeless, in New Orleans. Her monthly rent is \$1,128 despite the home’s location in a crime-ridden neighborhood. Holmes said, “We've found there are more homeless people than before. People are trying to find affordable housing, but it's hard.”^[7]

Matthew and Shawn Cheramie Dupre have lived in a tent for five months in Venice, Louisiana, without electricity while waiting for a FEMA trailer. “We lost everything in the storm. And living in a tent has been really hard,” Matthew Dupre said in a recent interview.^[8]

^[3] Gerard Shields. “FEMA rental plan drawing criticism,” *The Advocate*, April 27, 2007, Page 13A; <http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/7215681.html?showAll=y&c=y>

^[4] Joe Gyan, Jr. “New Orleans housing ‘mixed at best,’” *The Advocate*, May 6, 2007, Page 1A; <http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/7355611.html>

^[5] Joe Gyan, Jr. “New Orleans housing ‘mixed at best,’” *The Advocate*, May 6, 2007, Page 1A; <http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/7355611.html>

^[6] Lisa Lambert. “Money, health woes haunt Katrina victims: study,” *Reuters Health*, May 10, 2007.

^[7] Cain Burdeau. “Housing aid for Katrina, Rita victims will go to '09,” *Associated Press*, April 27, 2007.

^[8] Sandy Davis, “Refugees not allowed to talk with reporters; Katrina survivors still in tents as FEMA trailers sit empty,” *The Advocate*, July 16, 2006.

And at a recent hearing of the Senate Disaster Recovery Subcommittee that examined the federal government's response to the hurricanes, Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu complained that Mississippi received more Community Development Block Grant funding than it needed while Louisiana is struggling for housing dollars.^[9]

"We have a very popular southern saying," Senator Landrieu said. "'You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig.' Well, you can put an air conditioner and a patio and a porch on a trailer, but it's still a FEMA trailer."^[10]

Congressman William Jefferson, who represents New Orleans, said transitional housing is the key need in his district. "Housing citizens in trailers is acceptable on a very short-term basis, maybe a month or so," Jefferson said. "However, in a disaster of Katrina's magnitude, long-term housing in trailers is unacceptable."^[11]

"A stable and sustainable housing program is an essential backbone to Louisiana's recovery," Senator Landrieu noted in another recent release announcing a hearing later this month to investigate a potential budget shortfall in the State of Louisiana's "Road Home" housing program.^[12]

If budget shortfalls exist that are preventing Louisiana residents from accessing housing, scarce resources that could alleviate this problem should not be diverted to non-essential projects such as the proposed Wetland Center.

^[9] Gerard Shields. "FEMA shorted state in housing aid, official says," The Advocate, April 25, 2007, Page 1A;

<http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/7178836.html?showAll=y&c=y>

^[10] Landrieu release, April 24, 2007; <http://landrieu.senate.gov/~landrieu/releases/06/2007424D26.html>

^[11] Gerard Shields. "La. delegation complains of lingering storm issues," The Advocate, May 11, 2007, Page 16a; <http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/politics/7454596.html>

^[12] Landrieu release, May 7, 2007; <http://landrieu.senate.gov/~landrieu/releases/06/2007507B28.html>

Lake Charles region is already home to multiple tourist attractions and wildlife refuges

According to the Southwest Louisiana Convention and Visitors bureau, Lake Charles already has 4 museums and the Southwest Louisiana region contains 6 wildlife reserves for visitors and tourists.⁴

⁴ http://www.visitlakecharles.org/visitorinfo.asp?subcat_id=12&cat_id=102&step=2