
My Heart Is Tied Up in This Place:

Impacts of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill on Plaquemines Parish's Local Businesses

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My Heart Is Tied Up in This Place: Executive Summary

Local independent businesses play a fundamental role in the community. In the aftermath of large-scale disaster, however, they are often overlooked. With attention gravitating toward physical destruction and economic impacts measured only in the aggregate, the suffering of individual local business owners has historically received scant attention.

This report, however, puts local businesses at the forefront. Focusing on the impact the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill had on independent businesses in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, we sought to answer several questions. In what ways were the parish's local businesses affected by the spill? Did some fare better than others and if so, why? How were local business resources utilized in the cleanup and recovery effort? How useful were various financial mechanisms in helping businesses recover? And finally, how did the oil spill affect business owners' morale and aspirations?

To answer these questions, we conducted face-to-face interviews with nearly 50 local business owners, asking open-ended questions about their experiences and opinions. Analyzing the data collected from these interviews, we identified several themes and trends:

- » In the immediate aftermath of the oil spill, local businesses were disparately impacted; one year out, almost all reported being worse off.
- » The recovery economy bypassed most locally owned businesses.
- » Businesses have sustained themselves in spite of, rather than because of, mechanisms in place to indemnify them.
- » Plaquemines Parish businesses form a tight-knit and self-sufficient community that was challenged by the oil spill.
- » Confidence in the long-term viability of Plaquemines Parish as a livable community is key to continued recovery.

In response to these findings, we recommend actions that would address local business concerns in the midst of economic and environmental uncertainty, including:

- » Fairly and completely compensating all spill-related business losses.
- » Investing in infrastructure, workforce development and new industries.
- » Creating a well-organized and vocal advocacy group comprised of local-serving businesses.
- » Supporting state and federal processes that invest in Plaquemines Parish's future.

This report offers the reader an increased appreciation for the challenges and opportunities facing Plaquemines' local businesses in the post-spill economy. It discusses ways in which public policymakers, economic developers, disaster recovery planners, and nonprofit organizations can better mitigate adverse impacts and sustain the vibrant local business community in Plaquemines Parish.

Introduction & Background

Like all Louisiana coastal parishes, Plaquemines Parish shares a long history with offshore oil drilling. The intrinsic nature of this relationship accounts, at least in part, for why attitudes towards offshore development have been overwhelmingly positive among Louisianans. Offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico began in the 1930s, long before the advent of the environmental movement; offshore drilling even predated the establishment of Louisiana's commercial fishing industry. In fact, until the 1950s, shrimp were not believed to inhabit the open waters of the Gulf (Freudenburg & Gramling, 1993).

Today, offshore drilling is undeniably fundamental to the economy and culture of coastal Louisiana communities. Though global in scope, offshore drilling has always been a local business for coastal Louisianans. Countless local businesses have developed in response to the needs of drilling companies. Those that do not work in the industry undoubtedly know someone who does. As Freudenburg and Gramling (1993) put it, "When people in coastal Louisiana think of offshore oil employees, they think of people who live next door or around the block" (p. 358).

Coastal Louisiana has realized many economic benefits from the embedded offshore drilling industry, but the rewards have not come without costs. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill was the world's largest accidental oil spill and one of the worst environmental and economic catastrophes in the history of the United States. The explosion of the BP-leased oil rig on April 20, 2010, resulted in the deaths of 11 workers and the release of nearly five million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico before the well was capped three months later. The disaster affected beaches and marine habitats in coastal communities from Texas to Florida. With an economy hinged upon oil and seafood and still reeling from Katrina's devastation and the

impact of the national recession on the tourism industry, Plaquemines Parish was particularly vulnerable to the adverse impact of the calamity and subsequent deepwater drilling moratorium imposed in the wake of the spill.

Surprisingly little research exists that examines the effect of disasters on local businesses. The body of literature that is available suggests that disasters do not affect all businesses equally. Many escape disasters unscathed, while others actually benefit from the effects (Scanlon, 1988). Small businesses usually fare worst, lacking the geographical diversification, political power, and personnel and financial resources that help to sustain larger firms (Zhang, Lindell & Prater, 2009). This may explain why recovery and redevelopment contracts often bypass local businesses, gravitating instead to national companies (Gotham & Greenberg, 2008). Research indicates that the indirect consequences of an event are as disastrous as the direct impacts, and often worse (Tierney, 1994; Chang & Falit-Baiamonte, 2002). For many local businesses, the cumulative effect of direct and indirect blows is ultimately untenable and many of them fail (Alesch, Holly, Mittler & Nagy, 2001; Webb, Tierney & Dahlhamer, 2002).

The Urban Conservancy's Work with Local Economies

The Urban Conservancy was enlisted to assess the oil spill's impact on local independent businesses in Plaquemines Parish. The Urban Conservancy is a New Orleans-based nonprofit organization, founded in 2001, dedicated to research, education, and advocacy promoting sustainable land use and local economies.

The Urban Conservancy initiated its Stay Local! campaign in 2003 to help foster economic resilience and continuity in Southeast Louisiana. The goal was to educate communities about the importance of supporting local independent businesses in order to generate and retain more



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wealth within communities. Stay Local! encompasses the Greater New Orleans metro area, which includes the parishes of Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard and St. Tammany.

Our research and interactions with thousands of area businesses over the years has convinced us that local independent businesses form the bedrock of the local economy. Integral to community cohesiveness in good times and essential to community resiliency when calamity strikes, local independent businesses:

Come back first after major catastrophic events. Not only do they lack the option that chain retailers have to retreat to “safer” markets until conditions improve, they are more invested—socially, economically, and emotionally, in the recovery of their community.

Focus on sustainability, not expansion. Therefore, they need only achieve a satisfactory positive rate of return rather than a maximum rate of return.

Are place-based. They are much less likely to leave the community in order to maximize profits when labor and other costs increase.

Are motivated to respond to local needs. It is in the owner's best interest to conduct his business responsibly and to be an active civic and philanthropic participant in his own community.

About this Research

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the indirect economic effects of the claims and contracting processes on local businesses.

This research leads to an increased appreciation for the challenges and opportunities facing Plaquemines' local businesses in the post-spill economy, and underscores the importance of including them in post-disaster planning and recovery efforts. We conclude with several

recommendations for ways that public officials and business and community leaders can do this effectively.

This study is unique in its focus. Rather than concentrate on businesses that represent directly impacted industries (seafood, oil and gas, or tourism), this study is primarily concerned with the businesses that form the bedrock of Plaquemines Parish's local economy: the hardware stores, pharmacies, groceries, and restaurants that provide goods and services to the residents of the parish.

We began with a database of locally owned businesses within Plaquemines Parish that Stay Local! compiled in 2007. Building off of that list, we used convenience and snowball sampling methods to identify 43 business owners representing 46 enterprises based in Plaquemines Parish.

Between June and September 2011, we conducted semi-structured interviews with owners lasting 15 minutes to one hour, asking questions regarding:

1. The impact on local business sales and profitability
2. The integration of local businesses into the recovery economy
3. The barriers to financial recovery
4. The prevalence and usefulness of business assistance

The businesses we interviewed had between one and 50 employees, with the majority employing 10 employees or less. Firms from seven towns participated, spanning both sides of the Mississippi River from Belle Chasse to Venice. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the number of businesses interviewed by principal location and by primary business type, respectively.

Number of Businesses Interviewed by Location

Belle Chasse	16
Port Sulphur	10
Buras	9
Venice	8
Boothville	1
Empire	1
Point a'la Hache	1

ref: Table 1

Findings

In the immediate aftermath of the oil spill, local businesses were disparately impacted; one year out, almost all reported being worse off.

The oil spill provided an initial stimulus to nearly half of the businesses interviewed. This was due to the increased presence of BP workers, contractors, media and government personnel in the parish as well as claims settlement dollars that were reinvested into the local economy. "There were a thousand different companies down here," said one convenience store owner who, in the aftermath of the spill, saw sales (especially of certain alcohol, soft drinks, and tobacco products) spike. "I went from selling one carton of Newport cigarettes per month to 12 per week," he said. A business owner in the hardware industry said that homeowners used settlement checks to complete postponed repairs of property damage suffered during Hurricane Katrina. A local insurance agent saw new demand for insurance policies as new cars, trucks and boats were purchased with settlement checks.

Number of Businesses Interviewed by Classification

Eating & Drinking Places	8
Miscellaneous Retail	7
Water Transport & Services	5
Motels & Lodging	4
Personal Services	4
Finance, Insurance & Real Estate	3
Agricultural Services	3
Grocery & Convenience Stores	3
Hardware Stores	3
Wholesale Groceries	2
Heavy Construction	1
Industrial Supplies	1
Social Services	1
Automotive Dealers	1

ref: Table 2

Business owners indicated that the stimulus period lasted between 4 and 10 months, terminating around the beginning of 2011. "Many locals came in during the summer after the spill to buy things," said the owner of a retail store. "BP hired some locals for cleanup, so there was business in the store. We weren't negatively impacted in 2010, but this year BP is no longer hiring locals, so sales are down." Of the 22 businesses that reported improvements in business activity immediately following the spill, only six remained better off than their pre-spill position one year later. Three of the businesses returned to where they had been before the spill while 13 are now operating below pre-spill levels.

Not all businesses experienced the post-spill boom. In fact, 21 of the 46 interviewed

businesses suffered an immediate negative impact in the wake of the oil spill. None of these businesses have since returned to their pre-spill success. One business owner stated, "My numbers are down by half; it's disgusting." Many cited a tightening of customers' purse strings due to increased uncertainty about future contracts and employment. "Business is definitely down," one retailer lamented. "We didn't experience a boom or any increase in sales in the months following the spill. People aren't spending as much money. Both the number of customers and amount of each transaction have decreased."

Paradoxically, negative business effects from the oil spill did not always translate into negative attitudes toward BP, or even toward the oil spill itself. After enduring the economic consequences of Hurricane Katrina and the Great Recession, some business owners even saw the oil spill as a boon to the region.

The owner of seafood-related business saw sales spike 75 to 80 percent immediately following the spill as workers and contractors involved in recovery efforts flooded into the parish. By July of 2011, however, business was half of what it had been pre-spill, in part because of public wariness about seafood safety.

Nevertheless, the owner maintained, "The oil spill saved the parish – without it, things would have slowly gone downhill. Katrina led to new school buildings and a first-class fire station. I expect the same to come from the oil spill."

The recovery economy bypassed most locally owned businesses.

Those responsible for the post-spill response were afforded the opportunity to help local businesses mitigate their loss through participation in recovery work. Interview participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which local businesses were integrated into the effort.



Local businesses expressed frustration with BP's disregard for their attempts to participate in recovery efforts as vendors of needed supplies and services.

Some were pleased with the amount of work given to local businesses. One owner went so far as to say that BP "went out of their way" to incorporate local businesses, mentioning local caterers and sandwich shops in particular. Indeed, the most visible example of local business integration was the box lunch program during the initial cleanup process where meals for workers were purchased from local restaurants and catering companies.

All but one of the eight restaurants and food distributors interviewed were either involved in producing lunches or were at least aware of the opportunity. Not all food service businesses interviewed were satisfied with the level of integration, however. Businesses in other industries were even more disgruntled with the amount of local purchases. "I give them an F; even their porta-potties were brought in," said one business owner. Said another, "On a scale of one to 10, it's negative, off the charts."

Local retailers regularly stock many of the products necessary for recovery efforts. Many of them complained about BP's lack of awareness or disregard of local product offerings, in spite of business owners' repeated efforts to promote their capabilities. One retailer said that BP was "too up in the clouds" to know

what products were available locally. Another said that he "tried and tried and tried" to engage BP by visiting their local office and making repeated phone calls. "They did everything in-house," he said. "BP brought in their own equipment when they could have used someone like us to grow the local economy. Instead they outsourced to a company that specializes in disaster work."

Following the oil spill, local businesses increased inventory levels to accommodate the anticipated upsurge in demand. "We stocked up on water, Gatorade, and safety suits in anticipation of the demand, but hardly sold any of them," an industrial supply distributor said. "I made three separate sales calls to the BP office in Venice and each time I was turned away by state troopers." Another store owner said that BP placed an order for materials that were never picked up or paid for. The items, representing over \$100,000 in retail value, remain in the store's inventory.

Businesses that were given contracts often reported slow payment and unfair terms. To some business owners, this was understandable. "BP was usually late on their payments," said one. "But that's what you expect from a big company." Others said BP used their size as leverage, limiting the potential financial gain for local businesses. A restaurant owner reported being offered a contract to provide meals for a claims center, but that BP wanted to mandate prices and would not agree to a set menu, effectively prohibiting the restaurant from realizing a profit. The owner of a local motel said that for several months, nearly half of his rooms were rented to BP. "We billed them each month but had to run the gamut to get paid," he said. "Toward the end of the contract, BP had rooms on hold that no one actually used. We told them they were responsible for paying for them, but they refused to pay unless we were able to tell them exactly which workers slept in the beds."

Businesses have sustained themselves in spite of — rather than because of — mechanisms in place to indemnify them.

The 46 businesses interviewed were divided equally between those that had filed a compensatory claim with the Gulf Coast Claims Facility (GCCF) and those that had not. The decision about whether or not to file was difficult for business owners. For some, the immediate post-spill stimulus masked the deterioration of the traditional customer base and distorted sales figures. Believing that their short-term uptick was indicative of long-term stability, many businesses felt unjustified in seeking remuneration. The owner of a restaurant participating in the box lunch program said she would have filed a claim had her loss not been mitigated in part through her participation in the box lunch program. Even those with a clear adverse impact were reluctant to get involved in litigation. The owner of a local personal care service had a 30 percent reduction in revenue and was forced to lay off three of his 10 employees. Nevertheless, he elected not to file a claim, explaining, “I didn’t think I had a case.”

Many of those that filed claims were denied by GCCF because of their inability to show a financial loss for the period in question. The owner of a convenience store and service garage denied compensation for this reason said, “The loss of business came after BP left, not before.” “Percentage-wise, we haven’t lost ground,” said another. “But expected growth has been hampered for future contracts, which have been put on hold due to the moratorium. Proving economic loss is difficult; proving who is responsible for the moratorium is difficult.”

Interviewed businesses frequently pointed to an imbalance of power between themselves and BP. The owner of a retail store said, “I couldn’t hold out for big money. I had to accept what was offered and get on with business.” Owners of businesses that rely on the oil and

gas industry for their regular business were reluctant to file a claim out of concern for business repercussions. They believed that if they pursued compensation, BP and other oil companies would retaliate by withdrawing their business and refusing to award future contracts. “Either you get the business and you don’t make the claim or vice versa,” one respondent said. “The industry is powerful and well-connected,” said another. “They reward businesses that treat them favorably and punish those who do not.”

Other business owners appeared confused by the complexity of the claims process. Some misinterpreted the April 20, 2011, Transocean Limitations Deadline as the final day for filing a claim against BP and as a result, felt rushed. One business owner said that the deadline pressured businesses to make a decision before they could adequately assess the impact of the spill, adding, “We haven’t had a full year without BP yet.” Another, believing that he had missed his opportunity to participate in the settlement said, “In hindsight, I wish we would have filed a claim.” This perplexity highlights the need for professional counsel. “The outcome was disappointing,” said the owner of a local landscaping firm. “And we don’t have the money to hire an attorney.”

Plaquemines Parish businesses form a tight-knit and self-sufficient community that was challenged by the oil spill.

Asked about the strengths of the local business community, one owner said, “Everyone knows each other and sticks together.” Another said, “People in Plaquemines Parish have a different attitude; there is a camaraderie here not found anywhere else.” It was clear from other respondents that this solidarity had been put to the test.

Owners of businesses that were excluded from the oil spill response were frequently critical of those included. “The people who



Business owners criticized BP work programs like the Vessels of Opportunity citing evidence that contracts were granted based on connections, not qualifications.

got work had little to no experience,” said the owner of one firm. “It was all based on who you know and whose ass you were willing to kiss.” In concurrence, another owner suggested that many who received work through programs such as BP’s Vessels of Opportunity lacked qualifications, but had the necessary connections to get a contract. “There were some people who had been boat owners for years, but not everyone,” he said. “After the spill, it seemed everyone had a boat. That’s where the friction and animosity come in.”

Likewise, business owners who elected not to file a claim with GCCF were often scornful of those who had filed claims. Interviewees frequently equated settlements with corporate welfare or a “handout,” describing claims-filing business owners as opportunistic, dishonest, or weak. The owner of one company said, “It’s sad that so many got money that didn’t deserve it. We have too many people sucking the money tree.” Another said, “People are greedy in the way they seek claims money. It started after Katrina when people got lazy because of FEMA’s help. If they want things to get better, they’re going to have to work hard.”

There were significant reports of skepticism and

rumor regarding payouts that various business owners received. Many expressed outrage at the inconsistencies in claims payments, denouncing the process of determining compensation as misguided at best and corrupt at worst. A t-shirt shop in New Orleans that allegedly received a \$25,000 settlement was frequently cited as an example. “At first, BP was giving money to everybody,” said one business owner. “But they’ve since stopped.” The owner of a retail store who otherwise thought that BP did an “okay” job with their post-accident response said, “They spent a lot of money, but didn’t spend it well. They handled it a lot like the government would have: wasting money on people who don’t deserve it.” Respondents expressed more outrage about an undeserving business receiving payment than a deserving business being denied. The resentment was almost always directed toward other business owners rather than at BP.

Some local business owners, recognizing increasing tension within the community, believe this was an intentional outcome plotted by BP. “It’s divide and conquer, a basic strategy of war,” one said. “We were too busy being mad at each other, we were losing focus.” Another respondent described a situation where five business owners of the same industry suffered similar losses, but received payments ranging from \$13,000 to over \$100,000. When they started comparing amounts, the ones receiving compensation on the lower end were naturally upset. As a group, though, they realized that “this is what they want us to do; get mad at each other so we take our focus off of what BP has done.” They resolved not to let the injustice of the claims process come between them.

Confidence in the long-term viability of Plaquemines Parish as a livable community is key to continued recovery.

Nearly all of the business owners interviewed expressed uncertainty about the future of the

local economy. The parish's dependence on the seafood and oil industries, both of which were perceived to be in jeopardy, concerned many of the businesses interviewed. "I'm very scared," said the owner of a lodging company. "This time of year, people are normally making reservations for fall, but now no one is calling."

Consumer skepticism about the safety of gulf seafood was troublesome to many of the business owners interviewed. Some expressed conflicting emotions between the need to increase consumer confidence in the safety of local seafood and the need to demand further testing of seafood and the gulf habitats. One business owner pointed out the effect that the seafood skepticism had on Plaquemines Parish's overall economy: "There's a stigma in people's eyes, so people are not buying seafood any more, which means fishermen are not getting paid, which means they don't have money to buy any hardware or supplies." Some respondents requested that BP fund a public relations campaign to restore consumer confidence in gulf seafood.

Some are altering their business strategies to sustain themselves and account for the uncertainty. A few have expanded their advertising efforts. Others have broadened their range of product and service offerings. The owner of an industrial supply company, for example, has been collecting rock from land owned out of state and selling it for landscaping. Another local business owner opened a snowball stand in front of his shop to supplement income. A restaurant that primarily served seafood has added barbecue to the menu.

The majority of businesses have not considered altering their business plan, however. The most common response of owners, when asked about future plans for their business, was a frank, "I don't know." One simply said, "Prayer." A shrimp dock owner who saw his entire

customer base erode and was subsequently forced to lay off his entire staff said, "Fishing is all that many of us know how to do."

Others, like the restaurant owner who claimed, "the oil spill saved the parish," find reasons to be optimistic. A local business owner that grew up on the waters of Plaquemines Parish said, "We've been watching the land go away for years. People connect coastal degradation to BP, but that's not the case. However, it brought attention to the fact we're losing land and that's the silver lining." One business owner, expressing his cautious optimism, said, "We're going to do good; I'm not taking bad for an answer. But how long is this going to go on? And what if it the oil resurfaces?"

Despite the uncertainty, the resiliency of local business owners and their commitment to the parish remain obvious. Nearly everyone said that relocation was the least desirable course of action available.

One business owner was asked why he chose to return to Plaquemines Parish after losing his business in Katrina and temporarily relocating to Texas. His simple, yet profound answer: *"My heart is tied up in this place."*

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research of local businesses in a post-disaster context. The 2010 oil spill and the conditions in which it occurred, however, are unique and require customized solutions.

With that in mind, we offer the following recommendations that would have a direct and positive impact on a number of the challenges identified through interviews with affected business owners.

Fairly and completely compensate for all spill-related business losses.

The research identified three major problems businesses encountered when filing claims:

1. An inability to demonstrate satisfactorily losses suffered (due to an initial increase in revenues in some cases following the spill)
2. An inability to demonstrate that losses suffered were directly attributable to the BP spill
3. An inability to make a claim for lost growth potential

A recent settlement between BP and the Plaintiffs' Steering Committee (PSC) spearheading the litigation has language that addresses these problems. First, the settlement presumes that losses suffered by businesses and individuals in close proximity to the Gulf Coast were caused by the oil spill without requiring further proof. In other words, all businesses within Plaquemines Parish who were previously part of this settlement or that subsequently join, regardless of direct involvement in an industry affected by the spill, have a better chance at fair compensation and a transparent process.

Second, the formula for calculating the amount of compensation allows each claimant to select the months used to measure lost income or profits based on historical earnings. This will alleviate the problem of overly optimistic analysis of businesses' financial health during earlier claims processes due to the temporary post-spill stimulus.

Finally, the formula allows claimants to recover for lost growth potential and economic uncertainty using a formula that factors in the location and nature of their business (Plaintiffs' Steering Committee, 2012, March 3). Even those that choose not to join the settlement

(or who choose to opt out) will benefit from a more user-friendly, transparent claims process designed to alleviate much of the frustration, stress, and justifiable misgivings created by the GCCF claims process.

This research revealed reluctance among some business owners to engage in the claims process. The reluctance stemmed from a variety of factors including an unwillingness to accept a "handout" in some cases, inadequate recordkeeping that made losses difficult to prove in others, and challenges in getting accurate, timely information about the claims process. Whether the new process initiated by the settlement will sufficiently address these barriers remains to be seen. Another hurdle is that some business types, including a few represented in this study, are excluded from the settlement in whole or in part. Loss of income due to the offshore drilling moratorium is also excluded from the settlement (Plaintiffs' Steering Committee, 2012, March 9).

Invest in infrastructure, workforce development, and new industries.

While population in Louisiana increased between 2000 and 2010, Plaquemines Parish experienced a population decline of nearly 14 percent over that same period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Parish leadership is determined to regrow the population. Local business owners recognize the need for increased employment opportunities that will encourage those who have left to return and will draw new residents into the parish. Every new job created in the parish represents a prospective new client for the local businesses that participated in this survey. This is of utmost importance to local-serving businesses who are particularly vulnerable after disasters since they serve a market that is limited largely to the affected community (Zhang, Lindell & Prater, 2009).

Plaquemines Parish is challenged with

helping traditional industries like recreational fishing and commercial seafood recover from recent devastating losses while at the same time diversifying the local economic base through expanded workforce training, educational support, and innovative business development. There are signs of growth and recovery in traditional industries related to the Plaquemines port, harbor and terminal operations. Planned expansion of Stolt Haven Terminals in Braithewaite, additions to rail lines, growth at the local coal companies, and the construction of a new coal terminal and a new prison in the Davant area are further signs of economic growth. The resulting increase in jobs and population are increasing the demand for new housing construction. These are all encouraging indicators of a recovering economy and increasing confidence in the parish's long-term viability.

In addition to investing in traditional industries, Plaquemines Parish must seize this opportunity to diversify its economy through investment in new industries related to green technologies, green building, disaster recovery and coastal restoration. The 2012 Louisiana Master Plan for Coastal Restoration, the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process, the RESTORE Act, and countless other efforts are currently underway to create a parish that is less vulnerable to natural and technological disasters and the ensuing economic and environmental destruction.

Create a vocal advocacy group comprised of local independent businesses.

Large regional and national businesses tend to fare better than local businesses following disasters (Zhang, Lindell & Prater, 2009). One of the reasons suggested for this is the relative financial and political power they enjoy. To their detriment, local businesses tend to be smaller and are seldom well organized into advocacy groups for their specific interests. One solution

to this problem is the establishment of a task force representing Plaquemines' local independent businesses. This organization could advocate for taking steps to increase capacity of existing businesses and to ensure fair access to recovery and restoration projects already underway.

In the event of another disaster, the collective power shared in this organization will enable the local business community to quickly mobilize and demand opportunities for participation in rebuilding and recovery projects.

The Plaquemines Association of Business and Industry (PABI) is probably best suited to spearhead the effort to create such a task force. PABI's mission is to "provide private sector leadership and work for the business community to enhance the economic, civic, and cultural environment, and to advance the quality of life in Plaquemines Parish" (PABI, n.d.). PABI could work with business assistance providers to ensure systematic local business representation and integration into pre-disaster planning processes and post-disaster recovery projects. Stay Local!, as a five-parish independent business alliance inclusive of Plaquemines Parish, could serve as a resource and partner.

Support state and federal processes that invest in Plaquemines' future.

This research revealed local businesses' lack of access to the economic opportunities of oil spill recovery work. For most businesses, contracting opportunities remained elusive, regardless of their industry and despite their multiple and varied attempts to engage. Fortunately, various processes underway at local, state, and federal levels offer dozens, if not hundreds, of new restoration projects. These represent enormous economic opportunities for parish businesses. Local participation in these projects increases the capacity of the business community through workforce development and training and

ensures money invested in restoration efforts remain within the parish. Local businesses and community leaders must remain engaged and informed in order to shape and leverage these opportunities. Key initiatives include:

Natural Resources Damage Assessment

The NRDA process is intended to restore injured natural resources and address their lost uses by the public. Two Early Restoration Projects funded through \$1 billion set aside by BP have been selected in Louisiana, and both include Plaquemines Parish. The first is the Lake Hermitage Marsh Creation Project. This \$13 million project is intended to restore the eastern Lake Hermitage shoreline to reduce erosion and prevent breaching into the interior marsh and to re-create marsh in the open water areas south and southeast of the lake. Second is the Louisiana Oyster Cultch Project, a \$15 million initiative restoring oyster beds across 850 acres of several parishes (including Plaquemines), and improving an existing oyster hatchery on Grande Isle (Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Trustees, 2011).

The 2012 Louisiana Coastal Restoration Master Plan

This initiative is being led by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), is authorized by the Louisiana legislature and is charged with coordinating the efforts of local, state, and federal agencies to achieve long-term and comprehensive coastal protection and restoration. The master plan offers a broad vision for Louisiana's sustainable future, integrating previously discrete flood control and wetland restoration activities. The master plan website states:

The CPRA's Draft 2012 Coastal Master Plan is based on a two-year analysis involving some of the state's best scientists as well as national and international specialists. The state used this analysis to select 145 high performing projects that could deliver measurable benefits to our communities and coastal ecosystem over the coming decades. The plan shows that if these projects were fully funded, at a price tag of \$50 billion, we could substantially increase flood protection for communities and create a sustainable coast. (Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority, n.d.)

The RESTORE Act

The Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunity, and Revived Economies of the Gulf States Act of 2011 (S. 1400, 2011) presents one of the best mechanisms for continued funding of restoration efforts in Plaquemines Parish and the rest of the Gulf Coast. This bill would dedicate 80 percent of the Clean Water Act fines owed by BP and other responsible parties to a trust account, which would be used to fund environmental and economic restoration in the Gulf region. On March 8, 2012, the RESTORE Act passed overwhelmingly in the Senate with a vote of 76 - 22 (Alpert, 2012). This astounding display of bipartisan support bodes well for final passage of a strong bill that will help rebuild and strengthen the environment and support economic recovery.

Significant for the subjects of this study, the bill contains language specifically addressing hiring practices that favor local businesses:

In awarding contracts to carry out a project or program under this subsection, a Gulf Coast State or coastal political subdivision may give a preference to individuals and companies that reside in, are headquartered in, or are principally engaged in business in, a Gulf Coast State. (S. 1400, 2011)

Conclusions

This study analyzed the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill from the standpoint of an essential but often overlooked member of the local community: the independent business owner. Through four months of interviewing local business owners in Plaquemines Parish, we developed an immense appreciation for the obstacles they have overcome as well as the challenges and opportunities that lay before them. Based on our findings, we discussed policies and practices that public policymakers, economic developers, disaster recovery planners, and nonprofit organizations can undertake to alleviate economic and environmental uncertainty and bolster the local business community. In conclusion, we offer the three most salient points:

Local business involvement in the recovery economy is critical to long-term community stability.

In the aftermath of the oil spill, local business owners demonstrated their willingness to adapt their normal business operations and scale up their offerings by increasing inventory, investing in equipment and expanding staff to meet demands of the post-spill recovery. They acted in good faith and at enormous personal risk, yet their suggestions and offers of assistance were often unheeded. Mechanisms must be in place to insure that local businesses are included in pre-disaster recovery plans and post-disaster recovery efforts (Zhang, Lindell & Prater, 2009). Various initiatives underway at local, state, and federal levels offer hope that local businesses will play active roles in restoration projects. However, it is imperative that local preference be included not only in the language of the plans, but also in their implementation.

Conclusions (continued) ...

Reducing uncertainty will promote investment.

To induce investment from local businesses and outside investors, it is critical that Plaquemines Parish leadership restore confidence in the local economy. While sustaining traditional industries is absolutely necessary, Plaquemines Parish must also take strides to diversify its economic base through investment in new industries while simultaneously expanding workforce training to meet the demands of emerging enterprises. While some businesses we interviewed have altered their strategies to respond to the challenging economic environment, the majority have not. Many have worked in the parish's traditional industries for so long that they find themselves helpless to change course. Business owners showed an enduring commitment to the parish, but efforts must be taken to ensure the local economy remains viable for the long term.

The story of Plaquemines Parish's local, independently-owned businesses is one of hope and resilience.

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill was arguably the worst environmental and economic disaster occurring at perhaps the most inopportune time. Though devastating in its own right, the spill was but one in a series of economic blows that affected the parish.

In other communities, the aftermath of such a disaster may have simply been the last straw; the signal to pull up stakes and to move elsewhere. In Plaquemines Parish, however, it has energized and mobilized residents to redouble their efforts to find workable solutions to the parish's problems so that their families can continue to earn their livelihoods there for generations to come.

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My Heart Is Tied Up in This Place: Acknowledgments

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