

Coastal rebuilding awash in debate  
By Rick Jervis, USA TODAY  
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BAY ST. LOUIS, Miss. — It's late afternoon in this Gulf Coast community and the Mockingbird Café is abuzz: Businessmen nurse pints of local beer, a group of middle-school-age girls huddle around their homework, latte-drinkers peck at laptops.

Barely a hint anywhere of the 30-foot storm surge and raging winds of Hurricane Katrina three years ago that shredded shops in the downtown area, tore up streets and decimated homes. Gustav and Ike last month again flooded homes and ravaged local beaches.

"We're coming back," said Laura Kidd, a cafe manager. "It's a tight-knit community, and it's home. People want to rebuild right here."

The double-blow of Gustav and Ike — just three years after Katrina and Rita unleashed the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history — has reopened a decades-old debate amid coastal communities: defend or retreat?

Locals and officials throughout the Gulf Coast continue to press for more stringent building requirements and stronger levees and floodwalls to prevent floods. But some coastal analysts argue that coastal erosion is growing too fast and some Gulf Coast towns need to depopulate and move to higher ground.

The debate could be repeated in coastal communities in Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and elsewhere throughout the USA, said Robert Young, professor of coastal geology at Western Carolina University.

"It's hard to see how the federal government can continue pumping billions of dollars in protecting coastal communities," Young said. "At some point within the next two decades, some of these vulnerable communities may need to relocate."

Added Robert Thomas, director of the Center for Environmental Communication at Loyola University in New Orleans: "Once the nation begins this discussion, it opens a Pandora's box. It applies to everybody."

Southern Louisiana loses about 15 square miles of coastline a year, largely because of dredging and the 10,000 miles of transport canals dug by oil and gas companies over the years, according to the U.S. Geological Survey office in Baton Rouge. Louisiana has lost more than 2,100 square miles of coastline — about the size of Delaware — since the 1930s, and Katrina and Rita mauled 200 square miles, according to the office. Estimates for Gustav and Ike are still being compiled.

Towns that were once on high ground suddenly find themselves closer to the Gulf of Mexico, said Mark Davis, director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy in New Orleans.

"Storms that a generation ago would be only a minor inconvenience are now catastrophic to these communities," he said. "What's changed is not the storm — it's the coast."

Jean Lafitte, a Cajun community 30 miles south of New Orleans, was battered by Hurricane Rita in 2005 and badly flooded again by Ike. A former fishing town, today it houses many of the workers of the offshore oil and gas companies in Louisiana.

Stephanie Flynt, 38, who lives with her five children and five nieces and nephews, is moving her family to Birmingham, Ala. "The storms are getting stronger, and they're getting closer," she said. "It's too much for the kids. We don't have the money to do this anymore. We don't have the energy."

Chris Roberts, a Jefferson Parish councilman who represents Jean Lafitte and other coastal towns, said the debate should focus on how to strengthen the area's levees, not whether to move towns. Last November, Congress authorized \$100 million for levees around Jean Lafitte as part of an effort to fortify southern Louisiana. It has yet to be funded, he said.

"How can you ask these people to pack up and leave?" Roberts said. "We're not asking people to leave San Francisco because of earthquakes."

Louisiana officials had been working with environmentalists to restore wetlands while strengthening levees, said Simone Maloz of Restore or Retreat, a coastal restoration advocacy group.

"These one-two punches (Gustav and Ike) remind us that the decision is coming and may have to be answered soon," Maloz said.

Bay St. Louis, a thumb-shaped peninsula, is vulnerable to further punishment by Gulf Coast storms, Young said. The city is receiving about \$150 million for Katrina-related damage and will need an estimated \$3 million after Gustav, according to city officials.

"I don't think those folks should expect the federal government to put all the infrastructure back each time," Young said.

Last year, the Army Corps of Engineers encouraged residents to vacate vulnerable areas by proposing a federal buyout of 17,000 at-risk properties along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, including Bay St. Louis. The initiative sparked a loud outcry from residents.

Residents are building higher and smarter, said Harold "Buz" Olsen, Bay St. Louis' director of administration.

"These people who live here are born and raised here," he said. "Nothing can move them north. It's in their blood."