

# Council Update

## September 18, 2005

A report from the gulf

- Saddle Up

Driving from Davenport, the impact of Katrina steadily creeps up on you, albeit at different speeds. In customary public safety form, the Fire Department's incident command pickup sprints ahead, driving straight through. The slower moving, heavily laden public works caravan makes Memphis after midnight. Crossing the state line into town and thanks to a few phone calls from Davenport PD, we are provided a police escort to a secure resting place for the night. By dawn, the advance team representing the fifth and sixth Davenport firefighters in the gulf is already at work, meeting with what remains of Bay St. Louis staff and scouting a campsite for the full Davenport team.



On the road again after a few hours sleep, the public works team is focused on making the gulf coast by the end of the day. Breakfast is hurried and Art leads the caravan into the next storm, and the next and the next as the hours go by. Swift stops for diesel and gas find team members refueling with caffeine and sugar. Debit cards, secured by the Finance Department with some quick thinking, work most of the time and when they don't, American Express and cash do. Receipts for everything are hoarded by Redmond like FEMA reimbursement gold.

Mississippi is beautiful as we enter; mile after mile of verdant forest or sweeping natural vista. The beauty fills the gaps between men riding in pairs running low on chit-chat. Then, the first downed tree hundreds of miles inland. Could that be Katrina, or was it something else? A road sign bent over. Can't be Katrina this far inland? Can it? Each minute brings the team a mile closer to landfall and it isn't too many minutes before it becomes clear the growing anomalies are indeed the result of a massive storm. Part county sized tornado and part Biblical proportion flood, hurricanes are not to be trifled with.



By afternoon, we are becoming used to the kinetic art of trees snapped like twigs and man made tomfoolery twisted into scrap metal. Our last refueling stop is Hattiesburg. We play gas station roulette until we find one with enough supply and technology still intact for debit cards. The guys move ever more as a team. One of us with more quickness than sense stops oncoming traffic on a multi-lane highway so the whole team can execute a left hand turn out of the gas station. We stop and eat; a luxury so far on the trip, at Dairy Queen. We zip tie American and Davenport flags onto the Deere backhoe trailered by the lead vehicle and

try to make Bay St. Louis before dark. All along the way, we can't exit our vehicles without being thanked by someone and scarcely a car goes by without a thumbs up or wave. They typically start to sense something when they pass Gene at the rear of the convoy, ably coaxing the tire truck to stay with the team. By the time they pass the next few trucks, they get it. A team...from Davenport, Iowa ...is on the way.

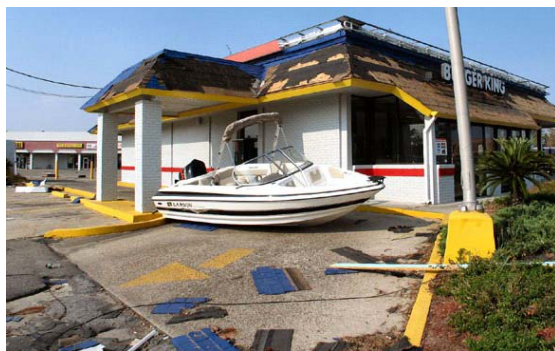
Three thoughts strike me somewhere in Mississippi. I haven't spent this much time in my entire life in the slow lane. I don't ever recall so many people saying "God bless you". Finally, I recognize that we have entered a zone seemingly without children. I haven't seen a kid all day. Truck after truck, camper after camper, full of earnest women and serious, weary men but no kids. Do we look like this too? And then, a school bus ahead ! Twenty miles inland, I hope to myself that the bus it appears we will pass (we pass so few vehicles I nearly recall each one) will have some school kids on it. A sign of normalcy, and hope, so near to the coast would be comforting. We inexorably move past the school bus and when I look over, hoping to see hope in the form of children, I see hope in the form of soldiers instead.

- Establish a Beachhead

We smell the gulf bay before we see it. Putrid. Acrid. Organic. In the bureaucratic lingo of the official FEMA request, it said Bay St. Louis needed a water and sewer team. One wonders how long it took that smell to work its way through the bowels of federal review to finally result in an authorization to mobilize. The good news however, is the smell isn't so bad everywhere, you do get used to it and it allows a certain freedom with recycling work clothes in a town with no Laundromat. The bad news is Bay St. Louis is devastated.



The advance team picks up the caravan after we have passed through a bombscape of community wreckage. The catastrophe is clearly natural in origin; there is no precision to it. Some cars are upside down. Some right side up. Boats are on land, in trees, at the Burger King drive through.



Every now and then, there will be some very small part of a street that looks almost normal. I recall these few instances like the few passed cars in our journey. The carnage is as oppressive as the heat, humidity and smell. The advance team has taken it in stride as we are greeted by the fit and filthy duo of Robb and Mark, who have obviously taken on their share of work already and established a good rapport with our hosts. "Fresh horses and Midwest work ethic" I hear someone describe us as.

There are few “high spots” in Bay St. Louis. Luckily, one of them is the public works garage. It has become one of a precious few operational bases in the community. We park our fleet there, not knowing at the time that we just doubled the municipal public works capacity of the community.

We are then led to “Camp Davenport” by real estate genius Chief Frese. Bay St. Louis has a historic, passenger rail depot that was functioning as an Amtrak stop and community center before Katrina. Think Union Station, still serving trains, with a community green in front of it, in a Spanish Colonial architectural style. It has become the emergency City Hall and emergency medical clinic. Think also Chicago’s Water Tower after the great fire, for it is remarkably untouched amidst utter destruction. We have doctors, nurses and Mayor Farve a few feet away in case we need them. Even better, this tiny oasis has power and running water. You can’t drink it and have to wash your hands with bottled water, but the toilets flow and we can power the air conditioners on our campers. Small comforts taken for granted elsewhere, but grand luxuries given the annihilation all around.



Bay St. Louis was a community of 8,000 residents. It is an inexact effort to interpolate what it must have been like having never seen it before, but it appears a modest, inclusive, beachfront community. It is also inexact to reckon the existing population, both resident and volunteer. A guess is 500 – 1,000 residents have returned and 1,500 – 2,500 volunteers of every description have descended upon the town. Combat engineers including Navy Seabees and a Canadian battalion rumble through with massive equipment. Public safety and private utility crews from

hither and yon operate as small teams. Red Cross and religious volunteers are ever present. Someone has opened up a field kitchen across from the public works garage. It is small and staffed with amiably weary volunteers turning out excellent chow. A hand drawn sign hangs from the tent, giving the venue five stars. The volunteer estimate is a guess, what isn’t is this single small town could use ten times that number and still have months of work.

It is dark by the time we return from dinner to Camp Davenport. The volunteer nurse advises our impromptu encampment wasn’t taken very well by Mike, the woman who lives in and runs the depot for Bay St. Louis. Too tired and too dark to move, we stay put. Mayor Farve returns from some mission and I make the semi-official intergovernmental introductions. The Mayor is exhausted but he is exceedingly gracious and pleased to meet the team. He thanks us again and again, telling us if Davenport ever needs help just one call will have Bay St. Louis “hauling ass” northward. We share some local government bewilderment at the pace and focus of the federal response, shake hands in parting and he heads off to get some camper sleep.

A cooler is opened to reveal a case of beer. No FEMA or City money spent on this, but it's the best money spent so far. Two long days on the road have come to a close and we can finally take a breather. The beer supply is (purposefully) limited, so we linger over each of our two cans, telling stories kept to ourselves while on the road. The fearsome Mike comes out of the depot to challenge our camp location and I am dispatched as ambassador to deal with her. Mike is tired



too, and we get off to a rocky start. I mention I know the Mayor, but that doesn't seem to help. I summon all consensus building skills I have and in the span of a few minutes of talking, we come to an understanding. We'll move off the parking area to the greenspace in the morning. She'll have parking available for the emergency operations and we'll still be close enough to have power for our campers. Another parting hand shake and I go back to tell the guys that Mike's a nice lady and we are only moving a few feet in the morning. I've earned my keep for the day.

The night lingers on and two rental trucks full of food driven by Guardsmen show up and ask us where to report to. We confess our newcomer status and suggest they drive down to the public works outpost. Then we wonder and worry on how uncoordinated the response must be if the National Guard is asking us for directions. Three of us head down to the beach a few blocks away. The moon partially illuminates a nightmare of obliteration along the way. The darkness is a blessing, as it hides the deathly detail. The short walk ends when a Florida trooper on looter patrol roars up to us in his squad and asks us where we live. "Davenport, Iowa" comes the implausible response, "we are here to help" the not so implausible rejoinder. The trooper advises we return to our campsite lest we be arrested or shot. The city is under an 8 pm to 6 am curfew, but it is not like they hand out flyers explaining the rules on the way into town. We dutifully return to our camp and the crew finds their sleeping positions for the night, some having more luck than others.



#### ▪ Reporting For Duty

Early risers anyway, Bill, Art and Dan are up before dawn, and greet those of us who couldn't sleep. True to our word, we break camp to move our rented motor home, trailer and storage tents a few feet just as dawn's first light trickles in. Not the best way to start the day, but we want to be welcome guests. The team piles into the back of a public works pickup and Josh drives us into the neighborhood on our way to the public works garage. Morning light reveals an unbelievable scene. Entire neighborhoods are heaped together into plateaus of debris. We drive slowly and each of us takes it in. We apply our professional assessments along the way from our varied backgrounds. The sewer team figures out how laterals tie into mains, the equipment operators talk through what attachments to bring on the backhoe and skid steer, civil engineer Tom surmises how the water system functions, while faithful mechanic Gene worries that we'll need more tire plugs. Then, something stops us all in our professional tracks.



We became accustomed to locals waving at us and cheering us on over the last day but, as we drive through an alley, a young boy having breakfast with his family in what remains of his backyard shouts out “thank you”. The child free zone notion is punctured. It is heartbreaking. We wonder aloud how this kid can deal with what he has and continues to live through. We are dreadfully sad, but enormously happy to be here to help.

Laverne, Tom, Josh, Mark and I meet with Buddy Zimmerman at the public works garage as the crew eats at the field kitchen. Buddy is a colorful Southern gentleman, as you hoped he would be. He is tired too, but won’t show it. Buddy tells us his public works department of 38 is now down to 19 and they are only able to field nine or ten employees on any given day. He already has faith in firefighters Mark and Robb from their exploits the day before, and quickly surmises the rest of the team is as skilled and committed. He takes an instant liking to kindred spirit Laverne, telling me “you can see he is thinking days ahead”. His eyes light up when he hears the team is here for 14 days and light up again when he reviews the vehicles and equipment we brought. We assemble a plan of action for the day and head over for some breakfast. On the walk over, Buddy tells us of acts of heroism through the storm that are as incredible as they are common. The field kitchen is almost tribal, with the uniforms of the volunteer workers on proud display. Our team looks resplendent in orange.

Grits and gravy go down unfamiliarly for some of us. Our compliments to the chef for the best / only grits we’ve had and we head off to prep the equipment. Two weeks after the storm and the vast majority of the city is without water and sewer. The tremendous challenge has multiple aspects. As trees were ripped from the earth, their roots tore water and sewer laterals apart. The



sewers are full of sand and other debris. Plateaus of rubble need to be cleared in order to get to the water lines so they can be repaired and water pressure re-established. Without adequate water pressure, there is no way to stop a fire that would streak across square miles of wreckage with the first fateful spark. Moving debris on a house by house basis to get to valves and laterals means moving it into streets and alleys. This creates new challenges for getting around town, so

it has to be moved back again. It's a mess and it's a mess that needs to be fixed - house by flattened house - before we can get to work on the sewers. Buddy issues the standard order; "what's ours is yours".

People who have lost everything are giving everything they have. It is tragic, and uplifting, at the same time. To a man, the Davenport team is moved and inspired. But they are an inspiring bunch themselves. On hours notice, they volunteered and mustered for a difficult and not fully knowable assignment in severe conditions. They moved almost 1,000 miles in two days with nary a complaint or scratch on the vehicles. They are inventive and hard working with deep reservoirs of caring just under their rugged personas. They are like the great majority of local government employees I have known throughout my career. It's an honor to be with them.



The Davenport team commandeers some Bay St. Louis equipment to supplement what we brought and load up on bottled water as the temperature and humidity start to rise. They split into teams and get to work, Bay St. Louis on the rise too.

The Davenport team in Bay St. Louis is:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Josh Howard	Plant Operations Supervisor	Dan Vanderpool	Laborer
Bill Moore	Sewer Heavy Equipment Operator	Gene Yocom	Mechanic
Bill Stebens	Sewer Heavy Equipment Operator	Tom Leabhart	Senior Engineer
Art Bartleson	Street Heavy Equipment Operator	Laverne Cole	Supt. of Sewers
Robb McDougall	Firefighter / Engineer	Mark Frese	Fire Chief
Redmond Jones	Assistant to the City Administrator		

***Thanks to all the members on the team, our firefighters in other gulf locales and thanks to their families and fellow employees who support them.***

*Note: A second team of employees including Keith Addison, George Schell, Jim Carlson, David Popp, Thom Leonard, James McAllister, Gail Greenwood and Police Chief Mike Bladel were rotated into service for a second two week period while some members of the first team stayed on. The two Davenport teams completed the mission of restoring water and sewer service to Bay St. Louis and all returned safely.*

*The narrative was later edited into the cover story for Cityscape magazine.*

