

Casino companies planning to rebuild in Miss.

BILOXI, Miss. (AP) - Putting casinos on ugly barges and sticking them in the water handicapped Mississippi casinos from the start.

The big gambling companies never could construct anything along the Mississippi coast grand enough to rival Las Vegas, Atlantic City or even large reservation casinos. Building on the water was inconvenient and put the buildings at more risk to hurricanes.

But now that Mississippi lawmakers have decided to allow casinos on solid ground, the Gulf Coast tourist industry could be at a watershed moment.

Hurricane Katrina has given casinos a chance to rebuild as mega resorts — with more entertainment, shopping and dining options — perhaps turning the Mississippi coast into a national tourist destination.

"I think one of the more significant advantages of this disastrous, miserable event is the fact that you're going to have much more exciting resorts developed that will attract more people," said



Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: A cleanup worker walks through the debris and destruction of one of the gaming rooms at the Copa Casino in Gulfport, Miss., on Monday.

Terry Lanni, chairman of MGM Mirage Inc., which owns the Beau Rivage in Biloxi. All 13 hotel-casinos on the Mississippi coast were damaged or destroyed when Katrina hit, prompting the gambling companies to question whether they should rebuild in a hurricane zone.

But industry leaders will give the Mississippi coast another chance, because lawmakers voted to allow the

state's coastal casinos to build up to 800 feet inland.

"I think being able to build on land, you can do so many other things," said Rick Quinn, chief executive of the Copa Casino that is slated to be scrapped. "And I think insurance would have been a problem if we had stayed on water."

Religious conservatives had fought successfully to keep the casinos off dry land.

But after Katrina ravaged the industry, a divided Mississippi Legislature voted to allow them to move inland.

Some casino companies haven't announced their plans publicly, but others have hinted that they intend to invest a lot more than \$100 million — the value of some of the casino barges that were washed across U.S. 90.

Harrah's Entertainment Inc., the world's largest gam-

bling company, has already said it will construct a "very impressive" hotel-casino in Biloxi. So far, it has not committed to resurrecting its Gulfport resort, a signal that the company could put its vast resources into a one major resort.

"There is a silver lining in all the destruction that happened, and we plan to be a part of it," said Anthony Sanfilippo, president of the company's central division that oversees the Gulf Coast.

Bigger casinos and hotels with high-quality entertainment would draw some visitors — especially those from the South — who normally go to Las Vegas.

Montgomery, Ala., residents Johnnie Early, 69, and John Bitter, 76, went to Las Vegas last year, but said they would welcome bigger and better casinos in the next state over.

"It's a lot cheaper to go there (Mississippi), but I would want really big casinos that have the big brand shows so that it's not just gambling," Early said.

MGM Mirage has already begun repairing the \$800 million Beau Rivage. When the resort reopens in 12 to 16 months, MGM Mirage will have invested more than \$1 billion in the property — on par with Las Vegas Strip hotel-casinos like Mandalay Bay and The Mirage.

But MGM Mirage can't move the 1,740-room Beau Rivage hotel tower or its casino barge across the street. The structures are firmly entrenched.

George Corchis, the Beau Rivage's new president, said engineers could raise the barge another five feet, allowing the main floor to withstand a surge similar to the one Katrina triggered.

"There is only so much that any of us can do to try and lessen the damage," he

said.

In addition to the Beau Rivage, Pinnacle Entertainment Inc. intends to revive its Casino Magic in Biloxi.

It's not only casino operators looking to capitalize. One company, Sandmark Bay, has announced plans for a luxury condominium project on a waterfront site of the Biloxi Back Bay.

City Councilman Bill Stallworth said the development could jumpstart a Biloxi renaissance.

Biloxi has a long way to catch up with the top gambling markets. Last year, Nevada generated \$11 billion in gambling revenues, with the bulk coming from Las Vegas. Atlantic City had \$4.8 billion and Mississippi \$2.7 billion.

Larry Gregory, executive director of the Mississippi Gaming Commission, said he believes Mississippi could rival Atlantic City in the coming years.

"We're going to come very close to reaching or exceeding Atlantic City. These aren't going to be cut-and-paste barges like we had in the past," Gregory said.

Not everyone agrees. "We believe operators building new land-based resorts in Biloxi should be at a competitive advantage to the older properties that were spared total destruction," said John Mulkey, a gambling analyst with Wachovia Securities. "We don't see a market anywhere close to Atlantic City, however, given the obvious population disparity in [each one's] feeder markets."

Gregory suspects some of the casino companies might decide the cost of competing with the new, larger resorts will be too high and abandon the area.

"I think there will be some attrition," Gregory said. "Competition is going to be fierce in the early days."

Rich, poor see poverty differently

WASHINGTON (AP) - The dramatic differences between rich and poor that were on view during Hurricane Katrina also can be seen by how those two groups view the causes of poverty. The poor largely believe they were dealt a bad hand while the rich are more apt to say poverty is from lack of effort.

Polling by the Marguerite Casey Foundation also found that both rich and poor are optimistic about future pros-

pects for their children.

Those at the poverty level or the near poor were almost twice as likely to say factors beyond their control are responsible for their impoverished state. Those who make higher incomes were evenly split on whether poverty is caused by external factors or by people not making enough effort.

Most in the public — at least three quarters — were aware of the big gap between

rich and poor in this country well before Katrina put those differences in the spotlight.

"We're looking more and more like a developing country," said Luz Vega-Marquis, president of the foundation. "We have a concentration of wealth in the top 5 percent, but what is happening to the middle-class and poor people?"

People of all income groups said they felt optimistic that their own children

will be better off in the future. The poorest were most likely to express optimism their children will be better off.

The polling found widespread recognition long before Katrina that poverty is a severe problem in this country, said pollster Celinda Lake, who conducted the second wave of polling.

"The conventional wisdom was that Katrina was catalytic to these attitudes about poverty," Lake said. "But these attitudes were evident before Katrina."

The polling found that "despite large income differences, there are very similar dreams and worries for both these sets of families," said Mary McIntosh of Princeton Survey Research Associates. "They're worried about money, affording health care and retirement, but they're hopeful about their children."

The poll findings are based on a survey of 1,546 parents of children under 18 taken from Dec. 9, 2004, to Feb. 12 and a survey of 1,000 adults from Sept. 30-Oct 3 of this year. The margin of error for each survey was plus or minus 3 percentage points, larger for subgroups.

Panel to oversee rebuilding

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - The president of Xavier University and a former chairman of CNN will lead Gov. Kathleen Blanco's advisory commission for Louisiana's recovery and rebuilding efforts in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Blanco unveiled the 23-member board of directors for the Louisiana Recovery Authority on Monday — seven weeks after Katrina struck the state Aug. 29, causing devastating flooding and wind damage, and more than three weeks after Rita followed with another harsh blow.

The group is charged with developing plans in 10 areas, including housing, economic development, education, health care, transportation, fiscal stability and environmental quality.

"Louisiana will never be the same, but that does not mean that our people and their institutions cannot emerge better and stronger,"

Blanco said.

Norman Francis, the president of Xavier, is chairman of the board; Blanco's chief of staff, Andy Kopplin, is director; and Walter Isaacson, former chairman of CNN, is vice chairman. Most of the board members were born and still live in Louisiana.

The authority leaders will work with a separate rebuilding group set up by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and pledged to rise above political infighting, partisanship and any old grudges.

"We can't afford not to work together," Francis said.

The announcement of the commission came one week after lawmakers complained to Blanco's staff that the hurricane response was moving too slowly. The top two lawmakers each from the House and Senate are serving as nonvoting members of the recovery authority.

Creative Touch Designs
presents
Mr. James
from L.A. to LV.

FOR HAIR THAT'S WORKABLE
SIMPLE & HEALTHY

HE'S MAKING IT HAPPEN AT
GULFPORT
WELLS

4705 S. DURANGO, STE. 110
call
943-3444 • EXT. 109 salon
OR
205-9955 mobile