

**The
BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 176 – March 23, 2006

House Katrina Package:
Much Too Little; Much Too Late
by Chris Kromm

[click here to become a](#)

bc PAID SUBSCRIBER

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly – PDF Format



Copyright © 2002 - 2006
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved

This article originally appeared in Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch.

On March 16, by a vote of 348–71, the House passed a bill to provide \$19.1 billion for cleanup and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. H.R. 4939, "The Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Hurricane Recovery," passed six and a half months after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, despite the efforts of key Republicans to remove Katrina funding from the bill entirely.

The House bill includes welcome, if belated, funding for housing, debris removal, and other important needs. But the package falls woefully short in providing the resources needed to address critical barriers to Gulf rebuilding, and comes way too late to help most survivors. What's more, the House Republicans voted along party lines to kill key amendments that would have boosted money for stronger levees and rebuilding homes.

No Money To Make Levees Safe:

With the 2006 hurricane season just 76 days away, House Republicans killed an amendment to the bill that would have provided \$430 million to fortify levees in New Orleans to withstand a hurricane as strong as Katrina (Category 3). The Army Corps of Engineers is now only authorized to rebuild the city's levees to Category 2 – even though some experts predict the chance of a "major" (Category 3 or higher) hurricane hitting in 2006 has increased by 18% over last year. (Sources: Baton Rouge Advocate, 3/17/06; St. Petersburg Times, 3/16/06)

Way Too Late:

The Black Commentator – House Katrina Package: Much Too Little; Much Too Late

The House bill, passed over half a year after the hurricanes, comes too late to help many Gulf survivors. For example, the measure includes \$4.2 billion in Community Development Block Grants to address housing needs, including \$1 billion for rebuilding affordable rental housing – important because renters make up the bulk of storm survivors. But New Orleans tenants have been facing evictions since October 2005, and the House rejected an amendment that would have barred FEMA from evicting residents from temporary housing until suitable alternatives are available. What's more, the Senate isn't planning a vote on its version of the package until May – 9 months after Katrina hit. (Sources: [Thomas](#), 3/17/06; [NY Times](#), 3/17/06; [Times–Picayune](#), 3/17/06)

Pits Gulf States Against Each Other:

The White House had targeted all of the \$4.2 billion in housing assistance for Louisiana, which bore the brunt of the 2005 storms. Yet Republican leaders insisted the money be split with Mississippi and Texas. Rep. William Jefferson's (D–LA) amendment to add \$2 billion to meet Texas housing needs without short-changing Louisiana almost passed, until Republican lawmakers twisted arms to defeat it. "This has put us in a competition for the pittance, the few dollars," said Rep. Charlie Melancon. (D–LA). (Sources: [NY Times](#), 3/17/06; [Times–Picayune](#), 3/17/06)

Ignores Major Barriers To Gulf Rebuilding:

The measure does nothing to address many of the most urgent problems that have stalled rebuilding in New Orleans and the Gulf. For example, Congress has yet to allocate money for reviving the Gulf's devastated health care system. Out of 22 hospitals in New Orleans pre–Katrina, only 7 are open now. There are no plans to re–open Charity Hospital, the only facility aimed at serving poor residents and where 2/3 of uninsured New Orleans patients received their health care. The bill also includes little or no money for re–opening schools, cleaning up soil and water toxins, and stimulating job creation – obstacles that all need to be tackled if New Orleans and the Gulf are to come back. (Source: [Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch/Institute for Southern Studies](#), 2/28/06)

Fails To Protect Voting Rights:

The House also voted down an amendment to provide \$50 million to help New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities organize elections. New Orleans will be holding elections April 22, yet only 45% of residents have been able to return thanks to lack of housing and jobs. 75% of the displaced are African–American. Today, the U.S. Department of Justice approved the April elections, despite a call from civil rights groups urging the state to provide satellite voting centers and other measures to reach displaced voters. (Sources: [Times–Picayune](#), 3/17/06; [Greater New Orleans Community Data Center](#), Feb. 2006; [Washington Post](#), 3/17/06]

Gulf Coast officials were clearly dismayed by this latest example of Washington's response to the 2005 storms, which they have viewed as slow and inadequate. Rep. Melancon (D–LA) expressed his frustration about his colleagues this way: "They're hoping we disappear off the radar screen. People who wear Christ on their sleeves and vote against helping people are the biggest hypocrites."

Chris Kromm is Executive Director of the [Institute for Southern Studies](#), a non–profit research center based in Durham, N.C., and co–author of "[The Mardi Gras Index: The State of New Orleans Six Months After Katrina](#)." Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch, a project of the Institute, was launched in November 2005 to investigate and document the rebuilding process in the post–hurricane Southern Gulf. Mr. Kromm can be contacted at chris@southernstudies.org.