



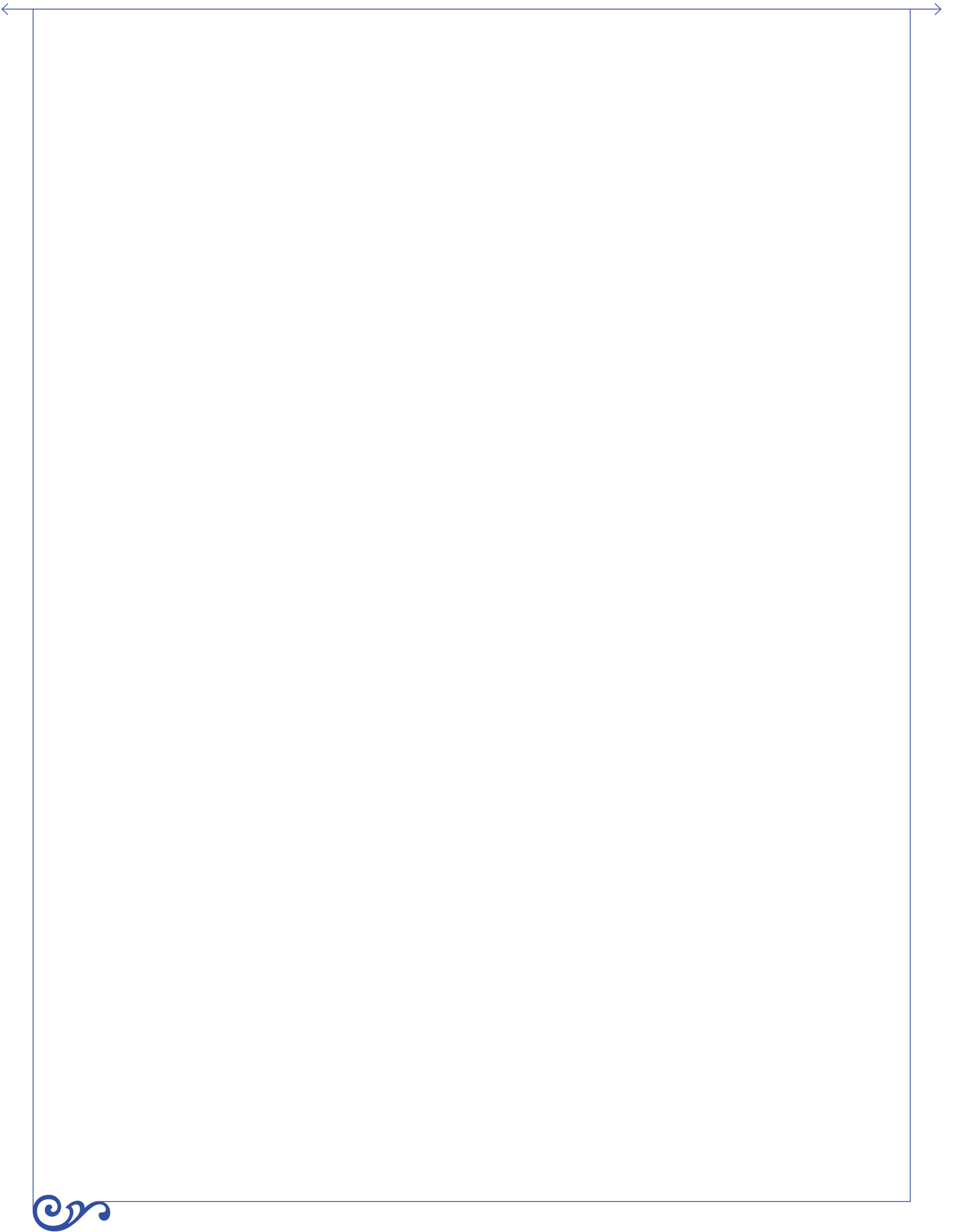
# Moss Point Residents Speak Out:

Moving forward on rebuilding  
a healthy and engaged waterfront city

BY LARA BIRNBACK, GWEN WRIGHT AND MCKENNA MORRIGAN

April 2009





# Moss Point Residents Speak Out: Moving forward on rebuilding a healthy and engaged waterfront city

APRIL 2009

## INTRODUCTION

Like many of Mississippi's Gulf Coast communities, the city of Moss Point, approximate population 17,000, suffered heavy damage from the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. City leaders, many of whom were newly elected at the time Katrina hit, have been undertaking the daunting task of rebuilding the city with a vision of transforming it into an eco-friendly "World-Class River City." Planning is under way on several fronts, including increasing and improving housing stock, repairing or rebuilding critical city infrastructure and reinvigorating the downtown Main Street area. Envisioned is a well-run, eco- and people-friendly environment that augments the city's traditional industrial economy with eco-tourism, taking full advantage of the beautiful waterfront setting.

In 2008, Public Agenda began to support the efforts of city- and community-based leaders to learn how to incorporate citizen participation in the city's recovery and renewal efforts. A public engagement training offered to members of city government, employees of city agencies, leaders of local nonprofits and community-based organizations in the summer of 2008 was an important first step in this process. Public Agenda then conducted a series of focus groups with diverse Moss Point residents with the goals of providing a cross section of citizens with the opportunity to talk about their city and their vision for

the future, informing leaders of the public's views and continuing to deepen the capacity of Moss Point leaders to engage with and respond to their constituents.

Our report aims to provide both city and community leaders with a better understanding of the public's values, visions and concerns about life in Moss Point almost four years after the storm. How do residents perceive the challenges and opportunities for Moss Point as it attempts to transform itself into a "World-Class River City"? What are their priorities for rebuilding and moving forward? An understanding of the public's "starting point" is essential for elected and community leaders alike in order to clarify three key questions:

- ❧ Which specific challenges and obstacles will need to be clearly and quickly addressed to facilitate true public support for sustainable progress on recovery and renewal?
- ❧ In what areas are there ripe opportunities for leaders and the public to work together on common goals?
- ❧ Where is there common ground among the views and visions of citizens and community leaders, and where are there significant gaps that need to be addressed?



## METHODOLOGY

Between October and December 2008, Public Agenda conducted six focus groups. Three groups contained a cross section of the general public with diverse incomes, educational levels, racial/ethnic backgrounds and length of residence in Moss Point. In addition, we held one group each with young people aged 17–24, local business owners and civic leaders, including directors of parent-teacher organizations, leaders of community-based or service-providing organizations and members of the clergy.

The sample of residents who participated in the groups is small, and the results are not meant to reflect the opinions of the entire community in the same way a methodologically rigorous quantitative study might. However, we feel confident that the participants are representative of the types of people and opinions that exist in the city; therefore, some valuable inferences and hypotheses can be made using this qualitative data.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Findings are discussed in detail in the body of the report, but we offer a brief summary of the key points here.

### 1. RESIDENTS DISCUSS

#### THE STATE OF THE CITY

Moss Point residents find much to value in their town and community, including easy waterfront access, an abundance of natural beauty and a small-town, neighborly atmosphere. However, for many residents, the good is being overshadowed by the bad, and the city's progress seems to have stalled in important respects.

❧ Many of their concerns center on basic quality-of-life issues concerning inadequate city services, declining public safety, abuse of drugs and a lack of recreation and retail options for youth and families.

❧ Beyond quality-of-life concerns, Moss Point residents are frustrated with what they perceive to be the very slow pace of redevelopment in the town in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and would like to see some tangible progress on rebuilding key infrastructure, as well as increased communication about what is planned.

### 2. EVERYONE BEARS SOME RESPONSIBILITY AND CAN PLAY A ROLE IN CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE

❧ Many residents feel that their elected officials are not as responsive to their concerns as they would like and don't demonstrate a strong enough commitment to working with the community or with one another to get things done.

❧ At the same time, many people agreed that community-based leaders and citizens themselves also have essential roles and responsibilities in making changes in their community and that the breakdown in leadership in Moss Point is not something for which elected leaders alone are responsible. They agreed that greater cooperation, coordination and communication between civic groups, community-based organizations and the churches is critical.



### 3. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF MOSS POINT

- ☞ Residents were generally very supportive of, and excited by, the vision for Moss Point as described in the Moss Point 20/20 Vision Statement. This is an area where citizens and city leaders seem to be on the same page.
- ☞ According to the citizens we spoke with, the most important issues to work on for the future are economic and workforce development, improvement of education (something younger Moss Pointers were especially concerned about), creation of more recreation opportunities, and the existence of affordable housing. Residents said they would be willing to get involved personally in efforts to make changes in these priority areas.

### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Our report includes specific recommendations for elected and community leaders (based on what we heard from Moss Point citizens) as they work to improve life for all residents, engage citizens in civic life and become more effective leaders in their own right. Following is a summary of these recommendations:

- ☞ Elected leaders need to quickly make visible improvements on some of the “first things first” quality-of-life concerns identified by residents, in order to improve daily life for residents, build hope for the future and foster trust in city leaders.

- ☞ Elected and community leaders need to work together to increase and improve the quantity and quality of communication with one another and with citizens about post-storm rebuilding and other issues of public concern.
- ☞ Engaging citizens in decision-making processes, and involving them in problem-solving efforts around critical city and neighborhood matters, especially those identified as “front burner” issues in the focus groups, should become a priority for both elected officials and civil society leaders in Moss Point.

## FINDINGS

### 1. RESIDENTS DISCUSS THE STATE OF THE CITY

#### **Residents appreciate Moss Point but feel the good is being overshadowed by the bad**

One of the first questions we asked our focus group participants was, “Do you feel that Moss Point is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?” Most residents we spoke with had lived in Moss Point for many years, and a majority had been born and raised there; they spoke of many things they liked about their community.

*I like the small-town atmosphere. It's just a beautiful place. It's always been a place that people just help other people. They just rally around each other... your neighbor will help you. It doesn't matter whether your neighbor's black or your neighbor's white.*

GENERAL PUBLIC



*We're centrally located. We're rural. We don't have to deal with the big-city issues, but we're conveniently located to everything. It's a nice, quiet living. If we can just get the rest of it to fall into place, it would be an absolute wonderful place to live.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*We really have a beautiful town. I'm real lucky to live here. Got real life potentials, and you got a lot of good people. There's some bad things, but...we got good people here.* BUSINESS OWNER

In general, however, most focus group participants felt that the city was at a standstill, not moving in any direction, while some participants felt strongly that things were moving in the wrong direction.

*I think the town has a lot of potential. [It's a] beautiful little town, but it seems to just stop dead in its tracks.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*I've been raised here most of my life, and Moss Point has deteriorated very, very much. I have got ashamed of my town... Moss Point used to be one of the cleaner little towns there ever was. Now, you can see trash all in the ditch. Where there's no homes at, it's not being cleaned up. It's rotten, and rats and weeds all grewed up [sic] in it, and I'm ashamed of my street.* GENERAL PUBLIC

One resident, who was white, questioned whether the town was overlooked (particularly by local and state officials) because the majority of the population is African-American.

*I think Moss Point's being kept backwards because the majority of its population is black, so we don't get the dollars that the other towns get, and I think it's darn unfair. I think that we've been forgotten, because most of the population here is black. It doesn't matter what color people are. The needs don't change.* GENERAL PUBLIC

### **Improvements in quality-of-life issues would make a big difference for residents**

Concerns about a variety of everyday, quality-of-life issues were very strongly felt and expressed by virtually all residents we spoke with. Residents' major concerns centered on poor water quality, unreliable or inadequate city services, a lack of retail stores and recreation and questionable public safety. Certainly, citizens in all cities and communities have complaints about how well (or poorly) local government is looking after their needs, and it is normal for some of these issues to arise when citizens speak about life in their towns, no matter where they live. However, we noticed a striking depth of dissatisfaction and level of frustration expressed by Moss Pointers.

### **Brown Water**

In all six focus groups, the issue of Moss Point's "brown" water came up almost immediately. Some people had concerns about the safety of the water, others simply felt aggravated by the color, but most were primarily frustrated that nothing had been done to address it, despite repeated promises of action.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Our focus groups were conducted between October and early December 2008. We learned in February 2009 that a long-promised reverse osmosis plant had come online in Moss Point, effectively solving the issue of brown water. As we explain in our conclusion, this is exactly the kind of tangible progress that residents need to see.



*Well, you pay for water you can't drink... when you get a rain, the commodes won't flush...but when they get a good rain, the water comes up in the house. It's just been like that, you know, for 30, 40 years, and they've not done anything.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*We don't drink the water anyway. I don't like to take baths in the bathtub because the water is so dirty looking. It's dirty before you even get in it. It's like, "Who's gotten in my water?" But nobody's gotten in the water.*  
GENERAL PUBLIC

### Unreliable City Services

A related concern was that city services like garbage collection, sewage line maintenance and road repairs were unreliable and the city government was unresponsive to citizens' requests for assistance.

*There's always a hole on First Street. Right up there by the car wash. You can call, call, call. That hole will sit there two, three months. I know a lot of people done had some damage caused coming down that street.*  
GENERAL PUBLIC

*We have potholes everywhere... When I say holes, I mean holes, okay?... If they [would] just go through an area and make our roads better, at least that will satisfy us, show us where some of our tax money is going.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*My problem is the sewage. I get tired of when it rains I can't use the bathroom. I got to go across town to somebody's house that the commodes are not overflowing. Then the ditches [overflow], too. The water stands in the ditches.* GENERAL PUBLIC

### Lack of Retail and Recreation, Fears About Public Safety

Another commonly mentioned complaint centered on the lack of retail stores in Moss Point; for example, many brought up the fact that the city lacks even a grocery store, forcing residents to go to neighboring towns to do their shopping — and spend their money.

*I was born in Moss Point. Around here, we had stores, all kinds of stores. [Now] we don't even have a grocery store.* GENERAL PUBLIC

Also of great concern across all the groups was the lack of recreational activities for youth and adults alike in the community.

*There's nowhere for anyone to go. There's nothing. Any night of the week you get together with a person, "Let's go do something. What do you want to do?" There's nothing... You either go to Biloxi, Pascagoula or Mobile. There's nothing around here. We don't have a bowling alley. We don't have a [movie] theater.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*[If teenagers] had something... constructive, something they would enjoy doing, then it would bring them off the streets, you know. Even maybe get the schools involved... have little dances and stuff for the kids... I think they need somebody to come in and try to get something going that the teens could be interested in.* GENERAL PUBLIC

In more than one group, the discussion of recreational options for children and youth brought up a sore point for many African-American Moss Point residents — namely, the closure of Moss Point's city pool following integration. A number of participants raised this issue with considerable unhappiness.



*Right in this area here we had a swimming pool. The... white people did not want to use the swimming pool with the black.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*They did not want to commingle. They did not want to integrate, so they closed the pool. They cemented the pool and that wasn't right. If you don't want your child to interact with a black person, if you don't want your child to interact with a white person, keep them at home. Don't make the rest of the kids suffer from you being a bigot.* GENERAL PUBLIC

Finally, Moss Point residents we spoke with expressed a great deal of anxiety about public safety. Numerous people mentioned that the city struggled with problems relating to drugs and crime and felt that not enough was being done by law enforcement to keep residents safe.

*[The problem is] law enforcement. It's been brought up several times here. I just live right down from the high school right around the corner. My house was broke into three times in two years. The last time, you know what they told me? "Get a big dog or a big gun. We don't have enough people."* GENERAL PUBLIC

## 2. EVERYONE BEARS SOME RESPONSIBILITY AND CAN PLAY A ROLE IN CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE

### Focus on leadership: Opportunities for improvement

A number of people acknowledged that while the storm was very damaging, many of the challenges facing Moss Point today have their roots in deeper economic factors,

specifically a combination of lost industry, a lack of meaningful employment opportunities and little new economic development. Yet for many people, not everything can be explained solely by the loss of tax revenue and a poorly functioning local economy. Residents in all six groups returned repeatedly to the theme of leadership — that is, in particular the lack of effective, coordinated leadership by elected and community leaders alike. As we noted in the previous section, complaints by citizens about leaders (particularly elected leaders) tend to arise naturally in focus groups; however, the strength of the concerns expressed by Moss Point residents was significant. At the same time, some residents recognize that they themselves and not just public officials need to do much more if their community is to rise to meet the challenges it faces.

### Elected Leaders Perceived as Not Following Through

Many residents felt that their elected officials were unresponsive to their personal concerns and weren't committed to working with the community or with one another to problem-solve and get things done to benefit Moss Point. The general perception was that arguments and egos too often got in the way of meaningful action.

*What I'm saying is if I call my alderman, he's supposed to be my alderman. If I called him, I want him to come out there and let me know that he is concerned with my concerns.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*Everybody wants to be in control. "I want it to be my idea. If it's not my idea, then nobody's going to have an idea." That's not the way to get things done... It's okay to disagree. It's*



*okay if you want it black and I want it white, then maybe we can make it gray... But in order to do that, they got to know that we as citizens are concerned, and we want something said and done.* GENERAL PUBLIC

Perhaps more than anything, participants in all the groups expressed a great deal of frustration with what they saw as the very slow pace and lack of progress on rebuilding and reconstruction in the wake of Katrina and Rita. There was a pervasive feeling that even the most basic efforts, such as replacing street signs and demolishing clearly ruined buildings, hadn't happened. This was especially difficult for them to accept when they compared Moss Point's progress with that of neighboring towns such as Pascagoula and Ocean Springs. They wondered where the state and federal assistance money had gone, since to their eyes there were few, if any, visible changes.

*They say all kinds of plans, but you never see anything happen. Why does it take so long to see some type of progress on the plans they made?* GENERAL PUBLIC

*Other cities are on the move. What has Moss Point done? I was told that some of the money has been lost because they're not moving fast enough.* BUSINESS OWNER

### Citizens Feel Excluded

We asked people if they had participated in public meetings of any kind — either the regularly scheduled meetings of the board of aldermen or some of the special meetings or events that were held specifically to address recovery issues, such as the “Open House” event organized by the

city's Community Development Office. A number of citizens said they had attended or tried to attend meetings of the board of aldermen, in order to find out news of the city or to speak about an issue of concern to them personally — but they described feeling largely unwelcome.

*I don't remember who the alderman was, but we had a meeting down at the church... I mean, you went in there and it was ridiculous. Everybody's idea might not be the idea that you want, but you've got to be able to listen... When we as a people can't sit down and reason together, then what are we showing?* GENERAL PUBLIC

Even more of the participants had attended the special ward meetings held after the storm and/or had participated in other events held in the city to share some of the development plans. Most of those people were generally supportive about the concepts they had reviewed and were happy to have been invited to see or discuss what was being planned — but the biggest problem was that they couldn't understand why they hadn't seen more action in the intervening months and years. The initial interest and excitement that had been stoked by their inclusion in the process had turned to frustration and cynicism.

*There were a lot of people that were really excited, but I think everybody's just discouraged, scattered, given up. I've heard people say, "I'm not going to those meetings anymore. I'm going to sit out." I know a lot of people just gave up.* GENERAL PUBLIC



*We had a big meeting of every ward after the hurricane about “What do you want to see in your city?” We haven’t got anything yet, from sidewalks, to signs, to playgrounds, to anything that you can think of.* CIVIC LEADER

### **Community-based leaders and citizens need to do more for themselves**

Many participants agreed that community-based leaders and citizens also have critical roles and responsibilities in making changes in their community and that the breakdown in leadership in Moss Point is not something for which elected leaders alone are responsible. A number of citizens felt that Moss Point has the potential for a more active and rich civic life, and we clearly heard a desire for that to occur, particularly in the groups with civic and business leaders. In their view, the absence of organized, citizen-led initiatives to improve life in Moss Point and advocate for their concerns with leadership was a significant obstacle in the way of progress. It may be that because these individuals are already demonstrating civic leadership, they were quicker to point out the important role regular citizens can and should play in advocating for and participating in change efforts.

One of the participants in the business owners’ group made the case that if citizens took the initiative to organize around the issues they felt were important, it would have the effect of attracting leaders who would be responsive to the community’s needs and priorities.

*Because we’re busy with our lives, and things that we do, there’s less time or attention paid to the community. If you want to bring about change, you have to be on a committee, one. Then form that union with other like-minded*

*folks... Not look to the city leaders to do that, but you must do this. When you take that responsibility to move forward in that, then you bring to your community the leaders who will follow your lead.* BUSINESS OWNER

One of the obstacles to a richer civic life was identified as a lack of coordination and communication between civic groups, churches, government and others involved in trying to improve life in the town.

*A lot of groups spring up, but there’s not a lot of continuity between groups. I’ve seen some cases where there’s been a lot of overlap because, well, if we don’t like the way this group is doing that, then we’ll just start our own group and we’ll try to get some things accomplished... You really need to look at consolidating effort and bringing together the people that may not always get along, but can work in a team environment to take care of all the needs.* CIVIC LEADER

Furthermore, Moss Point is home to a number of churches, which could be a strong asset to community development; but even some spiritual leaders we talked to admitted that they could do things better — for example, be more engaged on a full-time basis with their congregations, support or create initiatives for young people and the like.

*We [preachers] do a poor job. A lot of preachers think their job is to just preach on Sunday and get paid and go home. We should be the most influential people in this community.* CIVIC LEADER



### 3. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF MOSS POINT

*Moss Point 20/20 Vision: I'd love it! but  
That's a whole lot to happen in 12 years*

One of the things we were interested in learning was whether or not citizens and city leadership shared a similar medium- to long-term vision for Moss Point. Thus, in many of the focus groups, we asked participants to review and reflect on the Moss Point 20/20 Vision Statement, which was developed by a 30-person leadership team from the city and officially adopted by the board of aldermen in 2006.

#### ☞ MOSS POINT 2020 VISION

“Moss Point, Mississippi, is a friendly river city with an abundance of natural resources befitting the community. We are a five-star city with economic opportunities and outstanding public services that strives to enhance all aspects of education and the quality of life for current and future generations. We provide opportunities for every citizen to aspire to live the American dream, be proud of the city’s heritage and be enriched by the diversity of culture and faith. We are well-known for being green-focused and pollution- and litter-free. Public and private partnerships are continually at work to enhance our citizens’ daily lives.”

A few had seen or read the statement before, but most had not. One participant said he thought he had seen it on a website but had no idea what it was or how it came to be, and most others were also curious about its provenance. In spite of a bit of initial suspicion about its origins, the general reaction to the ideas and overall vision described in the statement was very positive. Residents

said things like “I’d love it!” “It would be nice if it were a reality” and “Sounds great.” One man said, “I would be quite content with 50 percent of that by 2020!” and another woman commented, “I like the first sentence. ‘We are a friendly river city with an abundance of natural resources befitting the community.’ I agree with that.” No one we spoke with told us that the vision was way off course or wrongheaded. This is encouraging news for elected leaders and other policymakers in Moss Point and represents an area where collaborations between citizens and leaders aimed at making progress toward this vision would stand a good chance of success.

Still, given what residents had previously expressed about the perceived lack of progress on rebuilding the city, it wasn’t surprising that another common reaction was skepticism that such a vision could come to pass in Moss Point. The climb seemed very steep, most likely because participants did not have a lot of experiences to draw on to suggest that the kind of city depicted in the vision was within their grasp.

*I’m going to say, I doubt it [can  
happen] in 2020... How are they just  
going to turn all this around in a couple  
of years? MOSS POINT YOUTH*

*We have all these resources, but they’re  
not helping us. They’re just here...  
When are our natural resources going  
to benefit the community? That first  
sentence is a very powerful sentence,  
but I would like to see [resources]  
benefiting the community more than  
anything else. GENERAL PUBLIC*



### Setting priorities within the Moss Point 20/20 Vision: Stronger education, economic development, better recreation and more affordable housing

In addition to the vision statement itself, we asked residents to comment on a variety of the specific ideas being promoted by city leaders and planners for downtown redevelopment, such as creating a vibrant waterfront and narrowing Main Street to allow for more pedestrian access and mixed-use development. In general, the participants in our groups had a difficult time focusing their conversation on these kinds of plans and kept returning to comment on the “first things first” concerns like water cleanup, sewage and garbage removal, street maintenance and other basic quality-of-life issues that we mentioned earlier in this report. In our experience, it will be critical for progress to be made on some of these issues before citizens will be ready to engage fully in questions around “smart growth,” “eco-tourism” and the like. This is not because Moss Point residents are not interested in or able to thoughtfully consider such questions. Rather, they need to see real action taken on their basic first-order concerns and desires before they will be fully ready to plan for a seemingly uncertain future.

Beyond the “first things first” items, residents in all of the groups had similar priorities for Moss Point — namely, economic and workforce development, more affordable housing, a better education system and greater recreation opportunities and activities for young people and families. And the citizens we spoke to indicated they would be willing to become personally involved in efforts to make progress on these issues — something that elected and community-based leaders

should note. Moreover, they realized that all of these challenges are interconnected and that forward momentum in one area would have ripple effects in another.

*[If you're going to move into a city], you want good schools for your children, you want public safety... you want good recreation. You come back into Moss Point now, we don't have those. Schools are questionable. Police are probably questionable. Recreation is basically nonexistent, other than what parents get out and do on their own, because it's not a priority.* CIVIC LEADER

*What I think would be a great idea is: affordable housing that people can purchase as opposed to being a housing project. That way you will take better care [of the property] and you will want your community to be better.* GENERAL PUBLIC

*We have more waterfront property probably than any other town along the coast. We have beautiful places, but there's nothing for young people here. There's nothing to employ them here, to make them want to stay, and until that changes, Moss Point's... never going to grow.* GENERAL PUBLIC

### Younger residents especially concerned about education

Although the young people we met in our focus groups shared many of the same perceptions as older Moss Point residents, they tended to be especially worried about the quality of the education they were receiving. One young man told the story of graduating from Moss Point High School with a high grade-point average and going on to college. He ruefully described the rude



awakening he received when he got to college and realized he was far behind most of his classmates. After spending some time in the military, he had recently returned to Moss Point and was teaching in the local schools, trying to prevent what happened to him from happening to his students.

*[In my class], you work hard for your A. Most of my kids are B's and C's... but when my kids go to the high school, [they] will be prepared. My D student will be prepared to excel [because] I brought rigor in the classroom. That's what I believe that the Moss Point system is failing to do, is bring rigor. Stop giving kids these false hopes, especially those that do go off to college.* GENERAL PUBLIC

His concerns were echoed by many other young participants, who felt they were not being adequately prepared for college and that sports and athletics consistently took priority over academics.

*Yeah, [in high school] they don't push you. They really don't. They don't get you ready for college. I mean, I hate to say it, but they don't get you ready.* MOSS POINT YOUTH

*Half of the time people graduate from high school, then they go on to college not because of academics, but because of sports, something they're good in, and then they drop out.* MOSS POINT YOUTH

Their concerns extended beyond what happens (or doesn't happen) in the classroom — we heard from youth and older folks alike that local schools needed big improvements in physical infrastructure as well as a change in how outsiders and young people themselves view the schools and youth of Moss Point.

*I feel like that I know a lot of people always stereotype Moss Point, say that we're so ghetto and all we do is smoke and get pregnant.* MOSS POINT YOUTH

*I think that one of the main reasons why people like kind of don't care about Moss Point or just talk bad about it is because... they say they're going to do stuff and then they never do it... You get all excited and then — because I know when I heard about that new high school I was like, Ooh, yeah, we're getting a new high school. Then it never came...* MOSS POINT YOUTH

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### Recommendations for moving forward

Public Agenda began our work in Moss Point by meeting with local leaders — elected, volunteer, community and clergy — in order to learn more about the city's plans for reconstruction and rebuilding post-Katrina. We also wanted to learn more about what efforts were under way to involve and engage the broader community in the formation and implementation of those plans and in the overall vision for the city. As a follow-up to those initial conversations, we conducted focus groups with a cross section of “average residents” to help us bring the citizen voice into sharper focus. We wanted to better understand how Moss Point residents viewed their city and community, to hear what kinds of issues they identified as priorities for moving forward and determine where the priorities they identified were in line with or different from the priorities and plans of town leadership.

We heard loudly and clearly the ways in which the focus group participants felt that their elected and community leaders



as well as they themselves as citizens were falling short, and we heard some of their priority areas for making positive change. After reflecting on what we heard, we'd like to offer three important recommendations that we believe are critical for Moss Point's elected and community leadership to keep in mind as they move forward. Those recommendations, outlined in the following section, are as follows:

- I. Elected leaders need to quickly make visible improvements on some of the "first things first" quality-of-life concerns identified by residents, in order to improve daily life for residents, build hope for the future and foster trust in city leaders.
- II. Elected and community leaders need to work together to increase and improve the quantity and quality of communication with one another and with citizens about post-storm rebuilding and other issues of public concern.
- III. Engaging citizens in decision-making processes and involving them in problem-solving efforts around critical city and neighborhood matters, especially those identified as "front burner" issues in the focus groups, should become a priority for both elected officials and civil society leaders in Moss Point.

**I. Make progress on "first things first," quality-of-life concerns**

*I think everybody's been told that something's going to happen and then it never happens. I think that at least one of these things has got to happen for people to start believing.* MOSS POINT YOUTH

To regain the trust of the citizens, Moss Point leaders must make some visible, "quick hit" progress on improving basic quality-of-life issues and on preliminary post-storm rebuilding efforts. As we explained earlier in this report, the biggest priorities identified by almost every citizen were the existence of clean, safe water for drinking and bathing, adequate garbage removal, clean and well-maintained streets and roads and some indication that action is being taken on highly visible post-hurricane demolition and rebuilding projects. Our belief is that only after some of these issues are addressed will residents be willing to fully engage with and actively support the ideas laid out in the Moss Point 2020 Vision Statement and plan for downtown renewal.

Of course, it's not possible to tackle everything at once, and some agenda items certainly require more resources than others, but we would urge Moss Point leaders to take action on at least a few "low-hanging fruit" items — that is, those that can be accomplished reasonably quickly and without a significant amount of new resources. This might mean an effort to replace street signs, pave pothole-filled streets, increase the frequency of garbage collection or make progress on planned demolition, so that people can see that things are moving forward — in their own neighborhoods and across the city. Some reforms may already be in the works or may already have occurred — in which case the only requirement would be a better effort at publicizing those improvements.

In addition to helping citizens see and feel that something is being done that will benefit them, making real progress on some low-hanging fruit items will demonstrate



that city leaders are committed to working together and making decisions that benefit everyone. Moreover, if some of the items they are working to improve reflect the public's main priorities, people will begin to believe that their concerns are being heard and taken seriously.

## II. Increase the quantity and quality of communication with one another and with citizens

*I would say something... that you could do immediately... communicate to the concerned citizens. Why should it be hard to send a flyer, a letter, something? I'm saying communicate to me and let me know what's going on.*

GENERAL PUBLIC

*[There was a] coffee talk at the school... The superintendent gave an overview of the schools. Now that's information, public information. He's at least trying to let us know what he's doing. If he can't get it done, he's letting us know. These folks haven't had a press conference, a briefing, a State of the Union, or State of the City... I don't think I ever heard them on the radio.* CIVIC LEADER

The good news is that one of the things citizens want most is one of the most straightforward and inexpensive things to do — increase and improve communication. Improving the flow of information from leaders to citizens and from citizens to leaders would be an excellent start on increasing citizen engagement and involvement and in creating goodwill among residents toward decision makers. Such an increase in communication could take a variety of forms and serve a number of purposes. Many residents said they had heard bits and pieces here and there about

ideas for the city's future, then hadn't heard (or seen) anything further, leading them to conclude in frustration that "nothing" was happening. At the same time, from our meetings with city leaders and task force members we know that plans are in fact moving ahead in many areas — but if our focus groups are any indication, the majority of Moss Point residents aren't aware of these things.

As a starting point, we encourage leaders to put into place some kind of process for regular, straightforward updates to residents on the decisions being made about the city's future and any plans for redevelopment to be put in place. This could take the form of a brief newsletter mailed to residents' homes and/or distributed in places such as churches, local businesses, the library and even the schools. Radio and television could be used to spread the word — in some towns, local leaders such as mayors give a weekly or monthly radio address (which can also be listened to or read after the fact online). An electronic newsletter could be distributed via e-mail to those who sign up for it, and updates could be posted regularly on the city's and/or school district's website. The next step, which we will describe in the following section on citizen engagement, is not only to provide opportunities for communication about decisions from leaders to citizens, but to provide citizens with opportunities to inform, influence and support those decisions.

Critically, as noted in the quote about the superintendent's coffee talk that began this section, it is vital to communicate even when it seems there may be nothing new to say or when the news isn't necessarily good. In many cases, it is just as important for residents to be told why something isn't happening and to communicate honestly



and without “spin” about setbacks as it is to trumpet good news. Doing so builds credibility and makes residents less likely to dismiss good news, when it comes, as empty public relations.

Community-based leaders and citizens must also recognize that they need to improve communication among themselves, as well as the people they are trying to serve and involve in their efforts. And they need to do a better job of letting the “official” city leaders know about their hard work as well. One young person in one of our groups said, “I don’t ever see [any community leaders]. I didn’t even know we had any.” Moss Point residents need to know that there are existing community-based organizations and leaders that are already working on issues of concern to them. Updating and informing the community and inviting them to participate in positive ways can only strengthen the quality of civic life in Moss Point.

Just as important as more communication and coordination, we heard many residents talking about the need for a different kind of communication — namely, one in which different ideas and opinions are respected and an atmosphere of collaboration, collegiality and respect for differences is front and center. Although we sometimes heard residents bring this up when they spoke about their experiences at the board of aldermen meetings, they were just as critical of how communication among residents and among civic groups took place.

*It’s like we don’t have that camaraderie where we’re going to all stick together. So here’s our children going haywire, and they see it because we can’t even sit down and have a*

*meaningful conversation without temperatures rising. We should be able to agree to disagree, but what’s going to get the problem solved? What is going to get it to be a better city?*

GENERAL PUBLIC

*You got to be able to express yourself to others without them getting an attitude and bickering and ready to fight and all that. We have got to work together to get Moss Point on the map.*

GENERAL PUBLIC

### **III. Engage citizens directly in problem solving and efforts to make progress**

*We need a lot of community participation.* BUSINESS OWNER

*We just need to work together and try... to get something accomplished in Moss Point that will benefit and help all of us. As far as the schools, the recreation, the housing, the jobs, everything else, all that goes with togetherness.* GENERAL PUBLIC

In spite of their frustrations, many residents also expressed a love for the town and a desire to be involved in helping it grow in positive ways. For their part, many city and community leaders told us they would like to find ways of involving the public in their work and creating two-way communications opportunities that are different from the typical model of unproductive and often unpleasant Town Hall-style meetings. To that end, our third recommendation is for grassroots and elected leaders alike to participate with citizens in efforts designed to give citizens a meaningful voice and role in problem-solving efforts. Well-structured, well-facilitated dialogue that brings diverse stakeholders to the table while putting



diverse ideas on the table can uncover common ground, lead to more clarity about disagreements, identify questions and concerns and result in ideas for moving ahead collaboratively on the problem at hand.

We know that such opportunities are not necessarily easy to create and/or sustain. For example, we heard from many Moss Point residents that the series of ward meetings held in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was something they really enjoyed and would like to see more of, evidence of something significant to build on. At the same time, people shared their disappointment that those meetings seemed to have been just a onetime affair. In some cases, this added to their skepticism about whether leaders were really interested in what they had to say and committed to communicating. Others felt that the initial post-storm planning meetings did not go far enough to ensure true citizen participation and suggested cynically that perhaps the lack of public participation may have even been by design: “It was almost like they took advantage of us while we were kicked down. Let’s rush in because they’re preoccupied trying to restore their lives, and make a bunch of important decisions without them.”

Organizers of citizen engagement and dialogue processes need to be aware of the possibility for these kinds of perceptions to lurk in the background. In addition, the fact that Moss Point, like many other communities, struggles with issues of equity and a legacy of racial inequality underscores an even greater need to meaningfully involve the broad community in the plans and decisions being made for the future. Whether in large public forums or small-group meetings, the act of bringing together a diverse group of citizens with different perspectives can be key to building public understanding and the will for change by getting various stakeholders on the same page and helping to show citizens that their voice, opinions and priorities matter — in short, that they too have a role to play in revitalizing their community. Reviving the ward meeting process, and committing to holding such meetings once a quarter, could be one step toward making progress on this recommendation. The most important thing is that whatever process is put in place, it should provide citizens with opportunities not just to hear from officials, but to discuss and engage with those officials and one another on the real challenges and opportunities confronting their lives and community. ☹





**Public Agenda**

6 East 39th Street · New York, NY 10016-0112

T: (212) 686-6610 · F: (212) 889-3461

info@publicagenda.org · www.publicagenda.org

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

