Biography

Mr. Vincent Creel was born on November 29, 1960, in Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mr. Gerald Creel (born in Biloxi, Mississippi, circa 1932) and Mrs. Frances Kuluz Creel (born circa 1943). His father was a firefighter in the US Navy in Gulfport, Mississippi, and his Grandfather Tony Creel was a seven-term Biloxi City Commissioner until the late 1960s. His mother was a civil service employee at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, and his Grandfather Vincent Kuluz was in the seafood packing industry, owning Kuluz Brothers Seafood in Biloxi. Creel is married to Natalie Campen Creel who works at WLOX-TV. At the time of this interview they had a son, Jedediah, born in 1992.

Creel attended St. John Elementary School in Biloxi, Notre Dame High School in Biloxi, Gulf Coast Community College in Perkinston, and The University of Southern Mississippi. Before becoming the Biloxi City Manager, Creel worked for many years as a reporter for the Sun Herald.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

VINCENT CREEL

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Vincent Creel and is taking place on March 19, 2008. The interviewer is James Pat Smith.

Smith: This is an interview with Vincent Creel. Vincent Creel is an employee of the City of Biloxi. The interview takes place in Mr. Creel’s office in the Biloxi City Hall on March 19, 2008. The interview is conducted by James Pat Smith of USM [University of Southern Mississippi] history faculty. The focus of this interview is Katrina, Katrina response and recovery on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Vincent, could you state your name and your position with the City of Biloxi.

Creel: My name is Vincent Creel, V-I-N-C-E-N-T, C-R-E-E-L. That’s out of habit. I am public affairs manager for the City. What that means is I am a person who is supposed to tell the public, or try to help educate the public on City policies, City procedures, things that the City’s working on, in short, tell residents what Biloxi is trying to do to make their lives better and give them an understanding on the challenges that we face. And I’ve been in this job for about fourteen, fifteen years now. And I’m just—the mayor thought it was a part-time job initially. He didn’t think there was enough work. And I said, “Well, there is enough work.” And what it’s been, it’s just been a fun job because I was born and raised here in Biloxi, before I get off the subject. I attended St. John Elementary School in Biloxi; I attended Notre Dame High School. I attended Gulf Coast Community College at Perkinston, and I attended The University of Southern Mississippi. I graduated from St. John Elementary and Notre Dame High School. When I went to Perk, I worked weekends at the Sun Herald newspaper, starting writing obituaries, going into sports. Then I went to USM, and I was asked to come back to the newspaper to work in the summer as an intern; then they had somebody on maternity leave. And Pic Firmin, who was the editor at the time, asked me if I would stay and work there. Not all Pic’s fault; it’s my fault, too. (laughter) I ended up liking work more than going back to school. It’s something I regret now because in this job that I have with the City, I would be paid more; there’s an education bonus if I have a degree. On the other hand, I think that everything that I’ve done in my life has prepared me or did prepare me to deal with the things that we had to deal with with Katrina.

Smith: I want to talk to you about a degree program when we finish.

Creel: OK, good. I’ve often thought about it.
Smith: What’s your date of birth?

Creel: My date of birth is [November 29, 1960].

Smith: Where were you born?

Creel: Biloxi.

Smith: What’s your current mailing address?

Creel: I was born at Biloxi Hospital that was down here on the Bay, right north, had been north of the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor. What’s the other question? I’m sorry.

Smith: Current mailing address? (A portion of the interview has not been transcribed in order to protect the privacy of the interviewee.)

Smith: What’s your telephone number here?

Creel: My telephone number here at work is area code 228-435-6368.

Smith: Are you married, [and] do you have children?

Creel: I am married. My wife’s name is Natalie Campen. My wife is originally from St. Louis; she’s lived here on the Coast for twenty years. She is the news producer at WLOX, the local ABC [American Broadcasting Company] affiliate here in Biloxi. And I have a fifteen-year-old son who is attending French Camp Academy in French Camp, Mississippi, burgeoning town of three hundred.

Smith: And what’s your son’s name?


Smith: And the year of his birth?


Smith: Do you have any activities or interests that someone fifty years from now would like to know about beyond your job and the career you pursued in the news business?

Creel: I need to—well, I’m trying to think of actual things, not what I need to or want to. I don’t know. I guess I’m a fan of politics, watching it on the national level, state level, and local level. And it’s something that’s always interested me. I don’t know. I try not to be defined by my job, but unfortunately (laughter) that usually happens. I just have an appreciation of history, particularly local history, because I think as the public affairs manager of this City, I think the thing that intrigues people most is
history and how we evolved to where we are today. And I’m certainly no authority on it. I know a little bit about it, and I just find it intriguing to look at old pictures, to look at old videos, to look at the way the city used to look and how it looks today. And I think people always—you hear the term good, old days—people always will romanticize history. I also think that it’s even more sad when you have something like a hurricane like this that comes in and wipes away so many historic structures and wipes away so much of your local history and the landmarks that you remember. But I think you’ll always have them inside of you, you know. And what it may do is it may help you to filter those things to where only the biggest things stand out, the most milestone events in your history, like the beach wade-ins we were talking about earlier, or other things. And I’m trying to look for a good side of this (laughter) whole encounter we’ve been through. But I’ve always been enamored with, fascinated by history, whether it’s World War II or whether it’s just significant events in history. We had a guy that came here after the storm who had been to the tsunami, and he just said that he’d always been to big events like that. And he happened to be on vacation in that part of the world, and he went there, and he wanted to know if he could come here. This was three days after the storm. And I said, “Well, we can’t bar you from coming here, but why would you want to come?” He said, “Because I just want to come see what it’s like.”

Smith: Real briefly, your father’s name?

Creel: My father’s name is Jerald J. Jerry Creel(?), and a lot of people call him Sunshine. He was a career civil servant. He was a firefighter at the CB [Naval Construction Battalion, Seabee] Base in Gulfport.

Smith: Do you know his date of birth?

Creel: I should, but I don’t. (laughter)

Smith: Place of birth?

Creel: He was born here in Biloxi.

Smith: Your mother’s maiden name?

Creel: My mother’s maiden name is Kuluz, K-U-L-U-Z. And her first name is Frances Kuluz, and I’m embarrassed to say I don’t remember her birthday, either. (laughter) My dad is seventy-six, and my mom is—they have nine years between them. So if he’s seventy-six—six months—[then] she’s sixty-five. She is a retired civil servant from Keesler Air Force Base.

Smith: Do you know the date they married?

Creel: It was one year before I was born. (laughter) I’m very sorry; I should know that stuff, but I’m defined by my work, unfortunately.
Smith: Did your mother have a career outside of homemaking?

Creel: Yes. She was a civil servant out at Keesler Air Force Base. She was the chief to the transportation commander out at Keesler; did all the logistics and so forth. She worked out there for fifteen, eighteen years. Prior to that she worked for South Central Bell as a telephone operator.

Smith: And you were telling me about your grandfather’s career as a City commissioner in Biloxi. What’s your grandfather’s name?

Creel: His name was J.A. Tony Creel, and he was a City commissioner from—he served seven terms, and his last one ended, I think, right before Hurricane Camille [August, 1969]. And I think he is the longest-serving citywide elected official in the history of the City and just always been proud of what he was able to do. And I was very fortunate because both sides of my family, the Kuluz side of the family, my grandfather, who I’m named for, was Vincent Bisco(?) Kuluz, and my grandmother died this week, as a matter of fact. And they were originally in the seafood industry, Kuluz Brothers Packing, and as I grew up, my little brother and my little sister, since my mom and dad worked civil service and had to be to work earlier than they could take us to school, we spent three or four days a week, sleeping with my grandma and grandpa. So I feel like, having lived on Back Bay and on Point Cadet, it gives me a unique perspective on two of our colorful areas of the city. I can remember as a kid, going and playing on the thirty- and forty-feet high oyster shells. I can remember when Point Cadet, after the Hurricane of Camille, whenever it was just barren land down there for the most part, where the J.L. Scott Marine Education Center, is where my grandfather taught me to drive. (laughter) And it was just an overgrown field, and it was just a uniquely rewarding experience growing up because of the great influences of all of my grandparents, both sets of them. And I’ve just been blessed and then to have two great parents, too.

Smith: Let’s talk about Hurricane Camille and your personal experience with that.

Creel: Camille?

Smith: I mean Hurricane Katrina.

Creel: I was eight years old during Camille.

Smith: OK. You were eight years old during Camille. Did you evacuate for Camille, way back there?

Creel: My grandparents had four houses down, right across from where the parking deck was between the Isle of Capri and Casino Magic. Back then it just had an old shell of a building over there where they used to have Kuluz Brothers Seafood Packing. And I remember my grandpa said—and the two houses, two in the front and
two in the back, the two in the back were rentals. And so I remember my grandpa telling my uncles, he said, “We’re going to go stay at Frances and Jerry’s on Back Bay by Gorenflo Elementary,” he said, “but let’s put the TV set on the dining room table.” And we went down there the next day; we got down there, and there had been a tire repair place across the street, and they had one of those huge Blossman butane tanks that you see (laughter) that was in their dining room, and there was nothing but a hulk of a structure left. But the two houses right behind the two front ones, they didn’t get water. They got no damage, just one of those weird things. And the most vivid memories I have of Camille, being eight years old, was that it was exciting. It was like camping out because you didn’t have power for, I don’t know, two weeks or so afterwards. And we had a lot of family members at my mom and dad’s house. They got a foot of water in their yard, but nothing came in their house. And it was like camping out, is what it was like. And it was exciting, and I remember, the vivid memories I have are those Reserve National Guard people and the Seabee people with these cranes that had these claws on them that would just pick up all that wood and put it in the back, or remnants of houses, and put it in the back of these trucks and haul it off, back in the days before we had FEMA or MEMA or anything else like that.

Smith: So you remember the military being involved in a lot of the cleanup in 1969.

Creel: Definitely. And out on the street corners and directing traffic and where the buildings had been destroyed and so forth, standing out in front of there, and riding around in the little Jeeps. And the other vivid memory I have is whenever—I forget how long it was after the storm, whenever my mom and dad said, “Come on. We’re going to take a ride over to the airport in Gulfport.” And whenever President Nixon flew in, and I just remember him getting off the plane and coming down the ramp to the tarmac, the stairway, and that quintessential pose (laughter) you always see with the two outreached arms and the peace sign with both fingers, both hands, and have no clue as to what he said, other than, “We’ll rebuild back better than it was.” But I remembered years later, working at the newspaper in 1977, that era whenever he had resigned, and actually I didn’t work there then. It would have been a little bit later whenever he made his first appearance, first appearance after the resignation here in Biloxi, at the Coast Coliseum for a veterans thing, and that was whenever you would have thought you turned the clock back to the days before the resignation, Watergate, and everything else. And I firmly believe that that was because people remember after Hurricane Camille, he took the time to come here.

Smith: OK. So that was [19]69. Let’s go to Katrina, 2005. What was happening with you the weekend of that storm? Where were you? What were you doing? How’d you figure out that it was something serious?

Creel: We had already had several storms that year. I mean in fact, I think it was a record-breaking number of storms. And we had a couple of issues where the mayor was very concerned. One of them, I think it was Ivan; maybe that was the year before, but what he was concerned about was that he didn’t know that people were taking these things serious enough. And one of the key things that he was worried about, I
remember, and he really—may have not been Ivan. It may have been in that same season as Katrina, but one of the things he was worried about was the casinos and whether or not—and not from the standpoint of, “We’re going to lose that economic engine,” but from the standpoint of the hotel rooms, and, “When are they going to close these things down when a storm is threatening?” And what it was all triggered by was the local civil defense, county civil defense person would have to declare an evacuation for the low-lying areas. And then the gaming commission would then, that would trigger them to say, “OK. Shut down the casinos. You’re to begin the closedown procedures,” which could take, in some cases, eight to twelve hours. And there was one of them where he had to call up and say; I remember he asked me. He says, “You know, I’m really worried about this storm.” Not Katrina, right before that, but this sets the stage. He said, “I’m really worried. I don’t think people are taking this thing serious enough, and I think it’s going to be something really bad if it comes our way.” And I remember he called Steve Delahooie(?) at the time, who was filling in over at Harrison County Civil Defense, and he said, “I’m going to go on TV at six o’clock, and I’m going to say that we need to close the casinos, and we need to have a mandatory evacuation of the low-lying areas.” And I remember we reached out to Bill Kildoff(?) at the Isle of Capri, and we said, “It would be really great if one of the casinos would close because we think that would lead the other ones to close.” And I remember Kildoff at the time, general manager at the Isle of Capri said, “We have to take our guidance from the Mississippi Gaming Commission.” And I said, “Well, if you have a fire, are you going to call the Gaming Commission and ask them if you should evacuate?” (laughter) And I said, “I realize we’re putting you in a position, but we just think that somebody needs to break here.” And so the mayor then called up the Mississippi Gaming Commission, and he said, “I’m going to go on the news at six o’clock tonight, and I’m going to say that I think we need to shut down these casinos.” And what eventually happened was, he told me, the mayor said, “They’re probably going to look at me like I’m a son of a bitch.” And I said, (laughter) “Well, yeah, they’re probably going to look at you that way, anyway.” I said, “But the fact of the matter is, if you think enough of this to where you’re sharing it with me, and I got a big mouth, then it’s going to bother you, if you don’t do this and something bad happens.” So they ended up closing the casinos, and they took action, and the storm went to Pensacola or somewhere else, (laughter) and he probably looked bad in their eyes.

Smith: Yeah. My parents were forced to evacuate.

Creel: So what ended up happening was, we go through, as time progresses and stuff. Next thing you know, we got this hurricane season where we’ve got Hurricane Katrina out there, and this thing, what set it up that weekend was that they were saying that this was going to be the worst thing we’d ever seen, and of course we had heard all that before in Camille, and everything else. “Nothing’s going to be worse than that.” A lot of people had that mentality of that was the gold standard, and all storms are measured by that, and, “I didn’t get water in Camille, so I’m certainly not going to get it in any other storm.” So what we did was, the storm had already passed across the Florida peninsula, and it killed like six or seven people there. And I remember we
were talking on Saturday and Sunday. I think it hit on Monday; at least, I hope to heck I’m right about (laughter) what day it hit.

**Smith:** Monday.

**Creel:** So we were talking on Saturday and Sunday, and I remember that Ronnie Cochran(?) was the City attorney, and he told me that he thought I was a little over the top by something I was advising the mayor. And what I was telling the mayor was I thought that we needed to let people know that this storm had killed before, and given the chance, it would kill again. And so Ronnie said, “Don’t you think that’s a little over the top?” And I said, “Well, frankly, it’s true.” And then somewhere during that weekend, President Bush declared this area to be a disaster area, and I remember going on TV at WLOX, and I think it was that Sunday, and I said just what the mayor’s feelings were about how this storm had killed before, and given the chance, it would kill again, and never in the history of our country had the president declared an area to be a disaster area before a storm had made landfall. So we’re dealing with things that are unprecedented. And the mayor and I talked about this after the fact that he said you could not imagine seeing something, or you just can’t believe it, the level of destruction. You couldn’t believe it. And I said, “Well, no, you can believe it because you can see it, but you just could not imagine it.” And I remembered one of the things we were doing prior to that storm, right that weekend was—and stop me, by the way, if I get off on some tangent. But I remember that we were getting these advisories that were being relayed to us by Biloxi Civil Defense, and I remembered I called up, and it was like midnight or so, or ten o’clock or so. That’s what it was, about ten o’clock, and they had that the winds were going to be such and such, and the tides were going to be such and such. So then the next one that came back, the winds were a little reduced, like they’d gone down to 150 or so. And these numbers, we’ll have to go back and look. But it was like they were saying the winds could be as high as 170 miles an hour and a tide surge of twenty-eight feet or twenty-nine feet or something. So the next one came out a couple of hours later and said, “Winds have been downgraded to 130 to 150,” something like that, but the tidal thing was still twenty-six, twenty-eight feet. And I remember calling, and I said—Linda Atterberry was our director of civil defense, and I asked her, I said, “Linda, is this wrong? Because I notice that the wind thing went down, but the tide thing didn’t change. Is that an error?” And she said, “No.” She said, “They’re still predicting that the tides are going to be that strong.” And that was the last thing that we had told the public was that, “You just need to evacuate, and we’ve done everything that we think we can do. We cannot make decisions for you on whether or not you should evacuate, but we can make a blanket statement, but what we’re telling you is that only you know what your situation is, and here’s what’s expected. Tidal surges of this magnitude, winds of this magnitude, and we are”—and every elected official has to go through this whenever they have a storm. They don’t want to force people to evacuate and then have the storm go hit somewhere else because they end up, they think, with egg on their face, and then some of them say, “Well, no, I would do it the same way again.” Well, after doing that so many times, they’re going to say, “No, I’m not going to overreact.” So it’s always a delicate thing, but from the get-go we tried to impart the
information, and as we were imparting that information, we never thought it was going
to be that bad, that it was just so over the top, these numbers. Who would have
thought? And I was here at city hall; we spent the night here Sunday. The mayor was
here; his wife was here. His brother was here. We had a council member here. The
mayor’s mother was here who lives in Ocean Springs, and my wife was at the TV
station. And that wind was just blowing all night, and something that was just weird
that in all my years of growing up and all of these storms, big and small, and tropical
storms, I never had seen a storm in the day. Never had seen one, and that water started
coming up. I was right here in my office on the third floor, and I had a little camera, a
digital camera, which I remembered had a video feature on it (laughter) where it could
shoot five or ten minutes of video. And I started filming that water. And it was a foot,
and then it got to be two feet, and the whole time the wind’s whipping that water. And
it ended up getting just to on top of the front porch here at city hall, but it never came
into the building, and that’s when you started seeing things floating up the street. You
would see the top A-frame façade of a house, and we couldn’t figure out what it was.
And it ended up being Piltz, Williams and Larosa’s (?) Accounting Firm, right north of
the town green. One of those construction dumpsters about—I don’t know—twenty,
thirty feet long, it was like somebody was driving it up the—and it didn’t move fast. It
might have been going—I don’t know—every fifteen minutes or so it might move
three or four feet. But it was like somebody was driving it, and it went through a little
magnolia tree in the library across the street from us, (and) it went right through that,
and it ended up in Page, Reno, and Perasich’s (?) parking lot, and we could see at
Wells Cargo, a little trailer that you would tow, those things must be really heavy, and
that thing somehow floated up. I could not see down past, from my vantage point here
in my office, I could not see down past the bank building, which is like a block down.
South of that’s where the Hard Rock [Café] was, which was going to be opening up
Wednesday, two days later. I couldn’t see all of that. Come to find out later, the
mayor could see that water down there at Hard Rock; he said he saw two buildings
fall. He said, “I saw a building go down, and then I saw another building go down.”
And later I—and I say later; it was Monday at one o’clock, and I had that little camera.
And I said, “Mayor, I need to get you on video and tape.” And he said, “What do you
mean?” And I said, “Well, we’re going to start forgetting this stuff, and I want to get
it to the TV station.” I don’t know what the hell I was thinking because (laughter) you
couldn’t get to the TV station. And he said that—I mean, he had to be in shock, I’m
guessing, to be in that position. I just tried to stay focused on my job, but what he said
was is that, that’s when he had that comment that this was, it’s like a tsunami. It’s like
a tsunami. And it was funny watching him (laughter) because I think he was
struggling with the word tsunami. He knew it was spelled T-S-U-N-A-M-I, but to
look at him, and as haggard as he looks, I wanted people to see that he was still the
mayor of Biloxi. We still had a city, and there was going to be another day.

Smith: How long had the wind been blowing hard before you saw water coming up
the street here, or did it come simultaneously? How did that happen?

Creel: I don’t remember exactly, but one of the things that I do remember is that
wind was blowing for ten to twelve hours it seemed like. The wind was just constant
and constant and constant, [and] that water came up, and I don’t remember. I forgot to tell you. One thing that I did was about 8:30 in the morning, and what I’ve been doing for every hurricane threat was I would get with our public works, our parks and recreation department, and I’d get one of these big trucks, one of the oldest trucks they had with a bunch of wheels in the back of it to where I could ride around the city and take pictures or whatever and going back to my childhood (laughter) I guess, the exciting period. But I’d gotten one of these trucks, and I had it parked behind city hall, and I didn’t dare ask the mayor because I knew what he was going to say. So I got in that truck, and I don’t know; I was going to go down to Point Cadet on Howard Avenue. And so whenever I went out there, the truck, it had those dually wheels in the back, and it was an old one, and as big as that truck was, it was being, the back end of it was going up, like, I don’t know, six, three to six inches, but it seemed like (laughter) it was going up a lot when I got in it. And the passenger-side window had already blown out; all of the glass slivers were right there on the seat. So I got in it, and I went a block over to Main Street, turned north and got on Howard Avenue, and that wind was blowing, and I could see, and this was 8:30 in the morning. And I could see those power poles leaning a little bit as I passed the community center, and that’s when it dawned on me, “If one of those poles falls, I’m going to have to call him up, and he is going to be pissed.” (laughter) And they may not be able to come get me. And right then I stopped, and I was right at Lee(?) Street, and boy, I could see that water coming across Howard Avenue. Lee Street and Howard Avenue is like a block off of the beach. And that water was just like he said, like a tsunami. It was only like a foot deep, but it was moving. And so that was 8:30, and then I turned around. But before I turned around, I shot some video, and I came on back here to city hall and then just continued to watch the water come in. So that was at 8:30 in the morning when that water was coming in, and at just like a steady, progressive rate of water coming in. And it would just get higher and higher and higher. And the sad part about it was, (laughter) among the many sad parts, that stuff all floated in, and for some reason, it didn’t float (laughter) back out because when that water started receding, which I guess, I don’t know, it was about two in the afternoon or 1:30, somewhere in there. When that water started receding, it’s like everything just stayed right where it was. And two of the front glass windows over at the Biloxi Library had shattered, and all of the mud and everything else just all went in there. And it just, I always hear that word surreal; you know, I always hear that word surreal. And unbeknownst to me, and it was funny doing that little interview with the mayor. He said that this was going to be an interview that was going to give people (laughter) confidence, and everything’s moving forward. You have nothing to worry about. And I said, “Well, what are you hearing?” And he said, “Well, I don’t know. I’ve lost all communication.” And the funny part was, the minute he said that, his radio was blaring. He had a police radio, and he had to turn it down, after he just said, “I lost communication.” What he lost was his preferred mode of communication, which I think was his cell phone. He was not one to talk on police radio. And I said, “But they know where you are.” He said, “Yeah. They know where I am.” He said, “And they can come get me if they need me.” He said, “But we got Bruce Dunagin(?) the police chief with years of experience.” He said, “I saw men on the street, I guess, till about three o’clock in the morning.” And let me stop and tell you something. I’ve
told this story years and years; I’ve told this story many times, this whole episode with Katrina, and I still find myself getting emotional about it. I hope that one day I am not as emotional about it, but on the other hand it’s something that I never, ever want to forget. And so I don’t really apologize for it, but I’m just letting you know that no matter how many times, it just still strikes me because when I was a child, it was an exciting time. There was some excitement with this thing, but then you start to see how it affected people, and you start to see what it had done to the city. And what our story had been since Katrina and even before Katrina, we are the most compelling story in the Katrina zone, here in Biloxi. And the reason we are the most compelling story in the Katrina recovery zone is because Biloxi—and I get unemotional when I talk about the City (laughter); I love talking about this—we were enjoying the most prosperous time in our three hundred year history prior to this storm. We had seen fifteen thousand jobs created. We went from 1960 to about 1992 without building one public school. We built Biloxi High School in 1960; we had to have two referendums before we could get air-conditioning passed for our public schools. Embarrassment, it’s embarrassing. But then again, I was a kid then, and I didn’t realize, maybe, that the economy was tough. Interstate 10 was finished in the [19]80s, and people coming from New Orleans and Texas and parts of Louisiana, instead of stopping here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, they went down to Florida where the water was [bluer] and the waves were bigger. And we had the situation where the economy was going down the tubes; the gas industry and the oil industry in Texas was going down the tubes, the oil embargoes and everything. And then we had places like Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head where we lost the snowbird traffic, the golfers. They would start going over there, so right that period at the end of the [19]80s, it was like, “The last one out of town, turn out the lights.” When parents sent their kids away to school, they knew there was a chance they may not be coming back to live here because there was not a lot of opportunity. So what happened was this thing of dockside gaming came up, and then here’s a legislature that wouldn’t approve a lottery, so this thing slips through the door. And it was just a little thing operating from Point Cadet, and then it ended up being to where they passed the legislation to where they would not have to leave the dock, and dockside gaming and so forth. They said it was going to create jobs, jobs, jobs. They said it was going to create three thousand jobs, and the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast could support three paddle-wheelers that could be docked there. And I’ve said so many times, Nostradamus could not have predicted what was going to happen, that instead of three thousand jobs and three paddle-wheelers, that we would in our city have nine, getting ready to have the tenth casino resort here in Biloxi, prior to Katrina, fifteen thousand jobs. We hadn’t built any schools from [19]60 to 1992, and yet in the decade of the [19]90s, we built three new elementary schools, a state-of-the-art high school, and we spent about eighty million on public education. As a result of that investment, we ended up being the first school district in the entire country to have surveillance cameras in every classroom. We were winning national awards for academic achievement. We were seeing—our teachers were the highest paid in the state. So then that’s what we were doing in education. We wouldn’t have been doing any of that without the casinos. Affordable housing is a thing you hear so much about today. “We don’t have enough affordable housing.” The Biloxi Housing Authority had already embarked on a HOPE VI project, federally-funded project, which means
Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere; thirty-five million dollars the federal
government gave them, and they were going to leverage that money to borrow even
more money. They had just built three hundred units over on Back Bay, and the first
fifty families were just moving in before the storm. Brand-new, and they had
architectural charm. It’s all this stuff you’re hearing about today on new urbanism and
having small streets and the town center and having retail and mixed use and mixed
income. So they were doing that. Then historic preservation was always something
important for us. We had redone the Dantzler House. We had redone the Tullis
Manor. We had redone the Crawford House, which was right next to the Tullis. We
had redone the Old Brick House. We had started a program where we gave people
plaques if they had an architecturally significant local structure, local house. So we
were recognized by First Lady Laura Bush for our historic preservation efforts, a
America’s Treasure Community. Historic preservation, education, public safety, our
public safety budget went from four million—that’s police and fire—4.5 million
dollars a year before casinos to today, it’s about thirty million dollars. Natural
progression. We doubled the size of the police department. Before casinos, we had
about ten or fifteen police cars. We had about thirty, forty officers. If those police
cars ran, they were on the street. We didn’t have the money to buy tires for the police
cars. The City was nearly bankrupt prior to casinos because we just, nothing was
happening in the economy. And so what happened, the seafood industry was a victim
of Hurricane Camille, was a victim of the imported shrimp, was a victim of the high
prices of [fuel], and the only thing that was keeping the seafood industry alive was the
Vietnamese people who began moving here in 1978. One of the first cities was
Brownsville, Texas, where Vietnamese refugees first settled in the United States,
primarily because of the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi. It was tough in the beginning
because a lot of people forgot that they were once immigrants, too, but they kept our
seafood industry alive. So we had the public education, the affordable housing
initiatives, historic preservation, public-safety spending. Crime never became an issue
because we had doubled the size of our police department. We went from not being
able to buy tires for the police cars to buying new police cars. Today we got about
two hundred of them out on the streets. Parks and recreation, we spent 4.2 million
dollars on the new Donald Snyder [Community] Center, ten million dollars on the
Biloxi Sports Complex, abolished all the registration fees for our sports leagues. That
meant instead of you having to pay ten dollars for your one kid to play soccer, another
ten dollars for basketball, another ten dollars for pee wee football, and then if you got
three kids, by abolishing all of those fees, that meant that more of our kids could play
in more of our sports. It was like a tax break. And then, speaking of tax breaks, we
reduced the City’s tax rate by 50 percent while we were doing all of these things. We
spent two hundred million dollars on all of these programs that I’m telling you about,
in a fourteen-year period, after having done nothing. We had to spend major work on
rebuilding our infrastructure for years of neglect because of a lack of money. We
rebuilt Oak Street, Lee Street, Howard Avenue. We rebuilt Keller; we rebuilt Howard,
all of these local neighborhood streets. Then we took on the big task of building a
new connector along Back Bay that would connect Point Cadet with Back Bay and
really connect it to Interstate 10, which meant you could get right on the Interstate,
Interstate I-110. Then we redid Popps Ferry Road. All of these things, close to a
hundred million just on streets and drainage. And we knew that we were going to have a big transportation issue. So we did all that, and then also we were putting some money into our culture. The Ohr O’Keefe Museum of Art, Frank Gehry, the world-renowned architect, it looks like a spaceship down there; I’ll admit. But we had all these casinos; we went from having 1.5 million visitors a year to Biloxi and the Gulf Coast, 1.5 million a year, maybe a million a year to between ten and twelve million a year. That’s a bunch of people; 85 percent of them were driving in. We saw the number of hotel rooms just about double. We were banging on right at twenty thousand hotel rooms when the Hard Rock was going to open. You need three things to have a resort area, destination resort. You need to have a good airport with daily jet service. We were doubling the size of the airport. (laughter) You need to have convention meeting space. We were doubling the size of the convention center. I say “we.” I mean this community. And you need first-class hotel rooms. We had all of these hotels. There were probably six thousand hotel rooms that were built just east of Caillavet Street, when you consider the Isle of Capri, the Palace, Casino Magic, the Grand, Beau Rivage, the largest private investment in the state of Mississippi, opened in 1999. So we had a lot of great things happening here. I mean, it was the most prosperous time in our three-hundred-year history. And then to have a storm like Katrina come along and just demolish a lot of the things that we had done, not only the things we had done, but the things that had been done in the previous three hundred years. And it was a case of where the mayor lobbied the legislature, saying that, “I think that we need to bring these casinos onshore, and I think we need to bring them onshore because it’s an industry that is so important to our community; we need to give them some protection.” And there was talk about moving them in fifteen hundred feet. He looked at a map, and if you did that on Point Cadet, then you would essentially be having, all of East Biloxi would be a casino zone. He didn’t want to do that. So he said, “I think five hundred feet.” And I can’t remember. It’s eight hundred feet now. So they ended up settling on eight hundred feet. And he looked at a map to see where it would still be some areas that there would not be casinos. He didn’t want the whole point to turn into a casino zone, which it may end up happening. But with that right there, what that meant was we were going to have this economic engine, and the casinos were the first ones to start coming back. The first one opened up in December, which was what? It hit August 29, so that’s September, October, November, December; four months later, the first one opened. Two other ones opened before the end of the year. The first one was IP [Imperial Palace], and then the Isle of Capri and the Palace, and that meant people getting back to work. That meant people getting back to work. These things have deep pockets; I’m sure they had insurance. The could afford insurance. A lot of people look at our story, and in the months right after it, they said, “Well, gee whiz, the casinos are the first thing back, and you got people over here who don’t have houses.” The bottom line there was is that that was a sense of people returning back to work. That’s why we thought that was important. I was being interviewed one time on the town green by CNN [Cable News Network], and the guy said, he’s looking—this was like four months after the storm, and he’s looking at all this debris that we still had around, and he said, “It seems like you have such a Herculean task here to rebuild.” He says, “At what point do you say, ‘OK. We’re going to fold into the county and not be a city anymore?’” He said, “At what
point do you say that? Do you just say, ‘Hey, this ain’t working. People aren’t coming back?’” And I said, “Well, we have the semblance of an economy here.” I said, “You see these casino resorts? They’re still standing. The hotel rooms are still there. We’re going to have that come back, and that’s going to help spur other growth that we had seen throughout the community, small businesses and so forth.” I said, “We have that, but if you go over to places like Long Beach and Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis and Waveland, I don’t know how they are doing it because one of them—I forget which one—lost essentially every piece of City equipment it had. And not only that, they lost all of their commercial sector, which meant all of their property taxes. They lost all these homes. How can they survive because they don’t have the money coming in? And they don’t have this economic engine that we have.” I said, “But if you go down there and you ask them, ‘At what point do you fold,’” then I said, “they going to be just as indignant as we are. They, ‘Yes, we’re going to be back.’” That’s been one of the greatest things of this whole thing, to see how people just, the drive and determination and just the spirit. I mean, it’s a cliché, but it’s just been great to see that. And I’m sorry, I just digress about all of this stuff. But that’s our story today. The governor really played right into our hands when he said, “I want to see a Renaissance in South Mississippi as part of this recovery.” And we looked at him like, “Hey, man, we were having a Renaissance.” (laughter) And so that’s when we came up with this thing called Reviving the Renaissance, and the best way to address all these issues that I talked about, the quality-of-life issues, affordable housing, land use in the future, public safety, culture, historic preservation, was to bring together the people, the volunteers in the community who had been working on that in the past, the people on the planning commissions, retired military people, the people who had a desire, or they had an attraction to working on those kind of issues before the storm, and call for them to come in and sit down and put together some plans on where we go from here. And that always gives politicians some elbow room, or a rock to hide behind. (laughter) Like, “Hey, this is what you told me you wanted.” So we called it Reviving the Renaissance, and they came together, and they delivered a report to the mayor that—oh, and the other thing I don’t want to forget is the governor, great idea, brought in all of these design people from across the country and world-renowned, and as I recall that was done like in October or November after the storm. We were still hip deep in dealing with what ended up being about three million cubic yards of debris that had to be removed from the city. The mayor had a big decision to make; he had two ways of doing it. We could turn everything over to the Corps of Engineers, and they would be in charge of removing all of that stuff, or we could take the aspect of, “We’re going to be in charge of it, and FEMA’s going to reimburse us, and we’re going to be in charge of handling all the bidding and all of the oversight and everything else.” And that’s the way he chose to go. And I’m glad he chose to go that way because if we’d have turned it all over to the Corps of Engineers, they would have cleaned up more; they could have gone on private property easier than we could have. But what the Corps of Engineers would have done is they would have been in control. When somebody called up Mayor Holloway and said, “When are you going to clean my street of the debris?” “Well, I don’t know; I’ll call the Corps of Engineers.” So he never gave up that control.
Smith: Do you know if the City of Biloxi had a preexisting contract on storm cleanup? Did you already bid with one of the contractors on it? Was something in place?

Creel: That was one of the things where I had to learn so much from watching this mayor. He’s a mayor, I like to think that he has an economy of words that he uses. He doesn’t say much. And it goes back to an old football coach that told him, “Don’t trust a living soul and be suspicious when you walk by the graveyard, number one. And number two, you don’t have to explain what you don’t say.” And what he did was he had two ideas before the storm. That’s the other thing we told people. They said, “Well, how come you didn’t get ready for the storm?” We were better prepared for Hurricane Katrina than we had ever been prepared in the history of our City. We had a plan where we were going to, and we did move our heavy equipment, our earth-moving backhoes and tractors and everything else. And the dump trucks, the great plan was to move them in key parts of the city so we would be able to have them prepositioned and staged and ready to go. We had the brand-new vehicles over at Yankee Stadium. Yankee Stadium is like in the middle of the peninsula; I mean, you can’t see the water from either side. I think they got three or four feet of water over there. They had a backhoe that was on a trailer, on the back of an eighteen-wheeler truck, [and] it got water in it. So that was—but we thought it was the prudent thing to do, to have this machinery in key places, strategic points throughout, not near the water. So certainly not before the storm, it wasn’t near the water. So that was the first thing we did. The second thing that we had done was we had sought to have a, it’s called a push contract, and what a push contract is just that, where FEMA will allow you to have contractor come in for the first seventy-two hours after a storm and push the debris off the main arteries so that emergency vehicles can get in. So they worked on that, and they worked on it. I don’t think it had ever been done in Mississippi. And don’t let me forget about the other thing that never had been done in Mississippi, and you know what that is. So what happened was, we had the bids on that contract, and we had talked to the contractor, and we told him---this is weeks, months before the storm. Never had actually executed the contract; didn’t have the guy’s name signed on there. So that storm hits, and of course, they reach out to the contractor. David Stale(?) our director of administration tracked him down wherever he was, and he knew the storm was coming, and so the guy was—and communications were really tough after that. But everybody has to remember; this storm just didn’t hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We all know parts of it hit New Orleans, but it was a two-hundred-mile swath that went straight on up the state, so people all north of us were impacted by this, too. So that made it very hard for them to get down here, too.

Smith: I’m going to pause for just a second and change the tapes. (brief interruption)

Creel: I get off on these tangents.

Smith: No, no. We’re talking about the—

Creel: Stop me whenever I do.
Smith: —preexisting contract, and that had just not quite gone to execution.

Creel: Are we back on?

Smith: Yeah. We’re back on.

Creel: OK. Well, that was pretty quick. What happened was, so the guy gets here; the guy gets here, and he’s over at the public safety center talking to the mayor, and they’re behind closed doors. And so the guy comes out, and all of a sudden he just leaves. What happened right after that storm, since it also impacted the oil refineries off the Texas and Louisiana coasts—I thought it was just here; I didn’t know it was all over the country—that the gas prices shot up to what? Over three dollars a gallon. And boy, we had long lines for gas when people could find it. But anyway, this guy came in, and what the bid said was you were going to remove this debris for this amount of money per cubic yard. Well, this guy said, “Yeah, I’m going to honor that,” he said, “but I also need to have a fuel subsidy,” because the price of gas had gone up so much. And the mayor said, “No. We’re not going to do that. That’s not in the contract.” And looking back on it, I mean, another person might have said, “Hey, we need to get this debris out of here. Just do whatever you got to do.” And he didn’t do that. He said, “No. That’s not what you said you would do.” And they just hadn’t executed the durn contract. So he left. So they bring in bidder number two, and bidder number two apparently didn’t talk to bidder number one, because he came in with the same idea, that he wanted to get a fuel subsidy, too. So they sent him packing, too. So I’m sitting here thinking, “Man, look at this. We had this big contract; we told people about it. It ended up not being executed, and now we’ve told the two bidders to go packing. So Yates Construction Company that had been doing a lot of work around here, the mayor reached out. I can’t remember if he reached out to them, or they just happened to be around. The mayor told them, he said, “We’ve got these two people that have walked out, and we need to get this work done. Can y’all oversee this contract and find some people that are going to do it for this price that’s on this piece of paper?” And we ended up having three companies that did. And I think Yates did the initial push contract, got these streets cleaned up, not cleaned up, but pushed stuff off to the side. And the biggest thing that we were looking at in the days after the storm was that we did not have water pressure, and what that meant was, none of the fire plugs, if you opened up a fire [plug], if you had a fire somewhere, when the fire department got there, and they opened up the fire hydrant, there’d be no water coming out. The reason there was no water coming out was because all of these six thousand homes and businesses—we had twenty-five thousand structures, twenty-five thousand homes and businesses in Biloxi. We lost six thousand of them. The very week after the storm we did what’s known as a wind-chill appraisal. We went to every—we had city maps, satellite maps of the city before the storm, and if the structure wasn’t there—I mean gone—they put an X on the map. So it was 5,012 were just gone. It ended up being six thousand because when they were able to get into the other ones and see the structural damage, they had to be declared gone, too. But what happened was the fire department and the public works department, they had
to go everywhere that the houses were destroyed because what you had on those pieces of land was you had a pipe coming out of the ground, spewing water. That was where those people had their city water service, and now it was just going out into the street, and it was taking away all of our water pressure. And I remember the fire chief told me, he said, “You need to do a press release saying that there’s a burning ban on. And he said, “We don’t have water pressure, and people don’t need to be burning.” It’s a Southern fascination, I guess, (laughter) to burn debris in your backyard, leaves. And I said, “OK. I’ll do that.” And I’m thinking, “How am I going to do that?” He says, “What do you mean?” And I said, “Well, we don’t have telephones, like the fax machine. We don’t have e-mail.” I said, “You’re thinking of carrier pigeons or just smoke signals?” [But] there’s a burning ban; no smoke signals. But it was the little things like that. When you would walk in your office, and you would flip the switch, and it wouldn’t come on. And we finally started—and I remember the fire chief told his men, he said, “I know that it’s thousands of these connections you have to go and cap off and cut off.” And he said that, “It’s overwhelming for you to look at it.” He said, “But what I want you to do is go out there today and do as many of them as you can do. Come back, and the end of the day, we’ll rest, and then we’ll go out again tomorrow, and we’ll do as many as we can.” So they did all that, and the water pressure started coming back. First place we got water pressure back totally was over in the North Bay area.

**Smith:**  Did they ever turn the wells off in Biloxi?

**Creel:**  The wells? That I don’t—

**Smith:**  Never did cut the system off?

**Creel:**  I don’t know. What ended up happening was we ended up getting the salt water inundation, and it destroyed the power panels at those wells. But as far as if the water ever went off, I don’t know. But I think the pressure was so bad. People see all these water towers, elevated water towers, and they wonder what they are, why they’re there. I think we have about eighty wells throughout the city of Biloxi, and they pump water into those elevated storage tanks, and that’s what creates the water pressure. But what happened was, for everything that we did, there was cause and effect. We had to always think one step ahead, and it was hard a lot. Donald Rumsfeld used to have that great quote, “You got the known knowns, the known unknowns, and the unknown unknowns.” We knew somebody might hijack a plane, so we made sure that we had things that would prevent hijacking. We also knew that—but we didn’t know when it was going to happen, somebody was going to hijack a plane. That was an unknown known, that somebody was going to hijack a plane, and then the unknown unknown was that they were going to drive it into a building. So the unknown unknowns and the known knowns and all of that stuff, here, it was just a bunch of them. Two quick examples. When we got the water pressure back, that meant people were going to want to start flushing their toilet, and I remembered, and I would go to the TV station every day in the morning and in the afternoon, sometimes three times a day. The TV station was doing what they call wall-to-wall coverage. And they were
simulcasting it on local radio stations. And I remember telling them as they were
talking to somebody else, I said, “We’re going to talk to people about how not to flush
their toilet. They’re starting to get water pressure back. And the problem is they want
to use that, but the wastewater treatment plants went underwater, so they’re not back
in shape yet, and the lift stations, which are these little things that pump the water to
the treatment place, the wastewater to be treated, those things—so it might back up in
your house or your neighbor’s house. It just is going to cause problems.” “So what
are you going to do?” I said, “Well, I’m going to tell people how to go to the
bathroom.” And they said, “Well, we really want to watch this.” (laughter) And so
what we ended up having to tell people was this, “You’re noticing you’re getting
water pressure back. Don’t drink that water. You can bathe in it, but please refrain
from flushing your commode because it’ll back up in your house or your neighbor’s
house. What we’re asking you to do, if you have to go and use the bathroom, we’re
asking you to get a plastic bag, like maybe a Wal-Mart bag, and take that bag and
place it in the bowl of the commode, and the two little handles on that bag, the two
little flaps, let them go over the bowl, put the seat down. Then you can sit down.
Once you are through going to the restroom, pick up the bag, tie the two handles
together and put it in your BFI canister, and we’ll deal with it when we can deal with
it, but we’re asking you not to flush your commode.” Just common sense stuff, but
you just had to think of a way to tell people and tell them why it was important. The
other thing was we lost the two bridges. We lost the Biloxi—it used to be called the
Biloxi-Ocean Springs Bridge; now it’s called the New Biloxi Bay Bridge. But what
happened was, after Camille it looked like dominoes, stacked, the slabs. After
Katrina, it just like wasn’t there. It was like underwater, and parts of it were gone.
And then the Popp's Ferry Bridge was out of line similar to the way the Biloxi-Ocean
Springs Bridge was. Some of its things were out of line after Camille. So one of the
key things that was going on was Mississippi Power Company had these coal barges
that they had to get to Plant Jack Watson, and what the problem was is whenever you
have a hurricane, when [the] winds exceed more than thirty-five miles an hour, you
have to do what is known as locking those bridges down to where those draws will not
be raised anymore until the storm passes and so forth. Since we lost all power, the
bridges had tremendous damage. The Popp's Ferry Bridge is low, [a] low-draw; so the
tugboats couldn’t get through. So what we had to figure out was—and the things
were, coal barges were in transit, and it would cause all kind of problems if they
couldn’t get to that power company. Little did I know that they weren’t generating
power there anyway, but it was running through that plant, being generated elsewhere,
but running through, and it would cause some problems in the flow, the routing, the
logistics of those coal barges, wherever they come from, so they had to get them to the
plant even though they weren’t generating. So our people went out there, and low and
behold, the bridge was able to raise. No traffic, no vehicular traffic could go across it
because the bridge was in shambles, but we were able to get it open so the coal barges
could get through. And that caused another thing that we at least knew was going to
happen, but at the same time that we announced we were able—we had like five days
to get the bridge open. And we were confident we’d be able to do it, and as we told
the public, “We’d been able to do everything else up to this point. We’ll deal with it.”
(laughter) So we got it open. All the boaters that had gone up the river, (laughter)
whenever they hear that the bridge is open, “Well, good. I can go back to the marina.”

(laughter) Well, there was no marina, and so we had to tell them to please keep your
boats where they are. So for everything that we did, there was cause and effect. So
people were just so patient. I mean, it’s just amazing how it brought communities
together. People were more inclined to say hello. And I don’t know how the mayor
did it, but everywhere the mayor went, people wanted to stop him [and] tell him their
story. And he patiently listened to everyone. I heard he got emotional a couple of
times. I saw the tinge of one. And we were in a directors’ meeting over at the Lopez
Quaid Public Safety Center. He had a directors’ meeting every day, in the morning
and in the afternoon with all the department heads wanting to know what was going on
in their departments and what issues they had. And a deputy fire chief opened the
door and walked in, and he said, “Mayor, Florida Rescue Team Three is getting ready
to leave.” And what Florida Rescue Team Three was; they had been hit by four
storms the year before. They had established these urban search and rescue, USR
teams. I can’t remember the exact thing, but what they would do is, they would go
into these devastated areas, whether it’s after earthquakes or whether it’s after storms,
or whatever, and they would check all the houses. And they would paint the symbols
on the side of the house to let you know if they’d found any bodies in there, to let you
know when they checked the house, to let you know if there were any type of issues
like gas, leaking gas. And they put an X on it if it was structurally unsound, and they
would just put a rectangle if it was just heavily damaged. But they were getting ready
to leave, and they had been here since right after the storm, Florida Team Three. And
I think they’d either stayed at the Donald Snyder(?) Center or at the Coast Coliseum.
And the mayor said—

Smith: How long did they stay?

Creel: I guess it was maybe a week, but I’m not sure. And the deputy fire chief, Kurt
Nofsinger(?) told the mayor, he said, “They’re getting ready to leave, and they want to
make a presentation to you.” So what happened was, he said, “Right now?” And he
said, “Yeah.” And so the mayor said, “All right.” And so I was sitting there, and I
said, “Well, shoot, let me go bring my camera.” And so we walked out of that door on
the second floor of the Lopez Quaid Public Safety Center—there’s a long hallway
there—and there must have been twenty of these men in fatigues all lined up. And the
head guy had one of those flags in the triangular frame thing, and he had a little piece
of paper. And he said, “Mayor Holloway,” he said, “my name is Commander John
Doe of Florida Search—USR—Team Three.” And he said, “I wanted to let you know
that it’s been an honor and a privilege to serve the people of Biloxi.” And he said,
“We want to present you this flag that flew over our camp when we were here.” And
the mayor just didn’t say any—he said, “Thank you.” That was all he could say. I
mean, what else do you do? (crying) And there were a few instances like that. That
was one. And I joked with him afterwards; I shot a picture of him. And I said, “Well,
I noticed you couldn’t say much.” And he said, “Well, what do you say?” And we
were in a directors’ meeting one time during that period, and—
Smith: How many people were lost in the storm in the city limits of Biloxi? How many dead that you know of?

Creel: Fifty-three people were lost here in Biloxi, fifty-three. And there’s been some question about that because some—and boy, that was the biggest question we’d get from the media every day. What we did in the days after the storm, we were getting so many requests from all of these people from across the country, still thought to get their cards. So I figured right away that this ain’t going to work. I mean, CNN, the Associated Press Agency, America Latina from Mexico, the Washington Post, Fox News, ABC, the Mainichi Newspapers, M-A-I-N-I-C-H-I from Latin America, from Mexico, Ebony Magazine, Fox News, WGM from Atlantic City, I mean, it just went on. So what we decided to do was we—go ahead. I’m sorry.

Smith: You’ve got a stack of press cards there about an inch deep that you’re looking through.

Creel: Palm Beach Post.

Smith: People that contacted you in the storm, came here in the storm.

Creel: Yeah. Wall Street Journal, Kansas City Star, a whole bunch of local affiliates, too, WDSU, the New York Times, CNN, Associated Press, News Hour with Jim Lehrer, ETV, I mean, it just went on and on. so what we decided to do is was we were going to have a press conference in front of Lopez Public Safety Center at eleven o’clock and three o’clock, I believe, every day. And so we were going to tell them where we were and tell them what issues we were dealing with, and we were going to meet again at three o’clock, and whether we had any new news or not, we were going to tell them the same thing. “And this is where you need to be because we don’t have a lot of time to do all these things separately.” The biggest question they had every day was, “How many people were killed?” And, “Well, that’s got to come from the county coroner. He’s the one that knows that.” And the county was doing a good job, too, of having these briefings on a regular basis, but people heard that name, Biloxi. Biloxi was the name. We’re the only city in the country named Biloxi. Biloxi had that history with Keesler Air Force Base where you had I don’t know how many hundreds of thousands of men that had come through that base over the years. We had ten thousand military retirees that lived here in Biloxi. Neil Simon’s Biloxi Blues. Biloxi had that name recognition. So they came over here after they went and got stuff from the county, whatever little news they could get. And which, by the way, we were the same way, (laughter) whatever news we could give them. And they kept wanting to know how many people had died. And I told them, “You need to talk to the coroner about that.” “Well, he won’t tell us.” I said, “Well, I don’t know what to tell you.” So after about the second day of that, I finally told them, I said, “If you look at the level of destruction, it could be several hundred, if not a thousand, people who perished in this storm based on the level of destruction.” And that may have ended up being an exaggeration, but they needed to know something. That’s what drives how important of a story it is, how many people died. And I don’t know if I regret saying...
that or not, but I mean, it was the best thing that I knew to tell them at the time, based on what we’re seeing. Now, the fire department had some men stationed at a fire station down there on Point Cadet, and the station had just opened, I mean, like four months before the storm. We had so many things happening when that storm hit, or we were on the verge of so many things happening. And that new fire station was built a foot higher than [Camille’s] water had been. And so what happened was the fire department was sending its men down there to check on their men the day after the storm, or I think that afternoon of the storm. And on their way down there they were running into people left and right who had not evacuated, who were hung up in their trees and who were on their roofs of their house. Unbeknownst to me when I was doing that interview with the mayor, the one o’clock interview with the mayor, I did not know until he told me, he said, “We had men out on the streets, but we had to pull them off because it was getting too dangerous. We told people that they had to move, that they needed to move, and if they didn’t move, at that point there was nothing we could do for them.” He said, “Now, I’ve heard reports that we had people trapped on roofs down on Point Cadet.” He said, “And that’s what concerns me now. What happened to them?” He said, “I also understand that water got in Edgewater Mall; water got in the Coliseum.” And he said, “And if what I’m hearing is true, this has been just total devastation for the city of Biloxi, that all the beachfront homes are going to be gone.” He had not left city hall yet. He had only been hearing these reports, and what ended up happening was it was fifty-three people that died in the storm in Biloxi. Some people still have issues with that because they’ll say, “That doesn’t include the ones whose deaths were caused by Katrina.” In other words, pretty much if you had a heart attack the next day, then from what I understand that wasn’t counted, if it caused your death. Apparently these were all the drownings and so forth. But the police department, unbeknownst to me had, it was like two hundred and forty-something calls backed up. Cell phones were still working during the early parts of that storm, and our dispatchers were still working. And what they were hearing was people calling up saying that, “Hey, I’m”—and some of them knew the people that were calling, and they said, “The water’s coming up, and we don’t know what to do. We didn’t evacuate.” And I listened to those 911 tapes, and it was just amazing how their training had taken over, and they remained calm and professional. One of them asked the guy, “Do you have any life preservers?” He was in the attic of his house on Point Cadet, and he’s got his elderly mother with him. And he says, “No, I don’t.” Of course, who’s going to have a life preserver in their house? She said, “Do you have anything that floats, like an ice chest or anything that would float?” She maintained her level of professionalism; it was amazing. And I was over at public safety a few days later, and I went into the fire chief’s secretary’s office. And I said, “How you doing?” And she said, “OK.” And she just started crying. And I said, “What’s up?” And she said, “Well,” she said, “I was taking some of the dispatch calls the day of the storm and that night.” And she said, “And some of the people would call two and three and four times, and every time on the last call, they would say, ‘I just want to give you my name and tell you who my next-of-kin is, and tell them I love them because I understand there’s nothing you can do.’” And this girl was crying because she said now as she’s hearing about the firefighters discovering these bodies on whether or not that’s somebody she talked to. And it was just—but the level of
training that they have, it all just took over as they were in that stressful situation, and we
would not have been able to provide them that training or that equipment had we not been having that great time that we were having, that vibrant economy that we were having prior to the storm. So it was like we were given the tools; we didn’t know that we were going to need them, have to use them, or when. But I’m digressing. I’m sorry.

Smith: No. That’s good. Let’s try and think about things coming out of the storm. You went through the charrette process, and the City has had its own group working, the Revive the Renaissance Committee. As you’re looking at the recovery over the last two years, since those groups produced their product, what do you think the biggest dilemma’s been, problems that you’re coping with? The debris is gone; the electricity is back on. The water’s back on. A couple of casinos are coming back up. What kind of things have had to be worked through since that time?

Creel: There’ve been a number of issues, and the issues are being driven by the fact that this has just been unprecedented, the level of destruction and the level of challenges where so many people lost so much. And everybody’s case was different. Some people owned their homes; some people rented their homes. Some people’s homes were paid off; some people still owe. Some people lived in a flood zone and didn’t have flood insurance. Everybody’s case was different. So there was no way you could just—well, you could. You could go stand on a street corner and give out two and three thousand dollars to people. They tried that in New Orleans, and people were buying Saints season tickets and x-rated videos. They tried it here; the Red Cross did, giving out two-thousand-dollar vouchers, and it caused so much chaos on people trying to get to those areas. But what we—and I want to back up on one thing on the Reviving the Renaissance Initiative. I said that the governor’s charrettes were here right like in October, November. We were so busy doing the things that we were doing, we didn’t have a chance to take part in that as much as we maybe should have or could have. But there were some strong-willed individuals that came in as part of that charrette, and they said, “This is what you need to do. This is the right way to do it.” And Mayor Holloway is pretty strong-willed, too, and he didn’t want to have something jammed down his throat without talking to his residents. So what the Reviving the Renaissance Initiative was, the mayor said, “What I want you to do is I want you to look at what we were doing right before the storm; I want you to look at the areas that we were dealing with, and then I want you to also look at the Governor’s Commission stuff and figure out, out of all these things, what’s going to be doable, what’s realistic, with a realistic timetable, and a realistic price tag. That’s your charge.” Not to throw [or] cast aside any of the stuff that was done with the Governor’s Commission stuff, but pick, cherry-pick, for a better word, the things that will work for us. Personally from what I’m hearing from people, some of the stuff that we’re seeing proposed now over in Gulfport’s going to be a hard sell because you’re looking at things that are going to cost a whole bunch of money. Point Cadet, this is the biggest issue that we have, and it’s not just Biloxi. I think other cities may be dealing with this, too. Everybody’s heard of the three big issues. The first issue is the cost of land. Second issue is the cost of construction and the cost of insurance, if
you can get insurance. And really there’s another issue, and that’s how high you need to elevate. But those issues, the only thing that’s really going to save some of them or help some of them is time. As we go by more time with less hurricanes hitting, then the price of land will start to drop. The price of insurance will start to drop, and construction is a supply-and-demand; it’s a function of the market. So you’ve seen high construction costs. Point Cadet, perfect example. People who lived on Point Cadet prior to the storm—and I don’t mean waterfront; I mean a couple of blocks in—they would have been happy to get—a property-owner down there would have taken fifteen dollars a square foot for their land with a house on it, fifteen dollars a square foot. After the storm, and to this day, we still have a number of property-owners down there that are demanding anything from eighty-five to 125 dollars. We got a council member who is not going to sell his property unless he gets $125 a square foot. People talk about affordable housing. You cannot do affordable housing in an environment where land is unaffordable. Traditionally the cost of land will cost a developer probably about, from the things I’m told, 15 to 20 percent of his overall project. [The] cost of land, that’s what that will be. They’re looking at the cost of land now to being 40 to 50 percent of the overall project, so you can’t make the numbers work. And then you’re going to be looking at providing affordable housing in an area of the city where the annual household income was in the neighborhood of about thirty thousand dollars. So there’s just no way that you’re going to be able to do that. And I’ve got—

**Smith:** You’re trying to get a hundred dollars a square foot for the land. For the record, probably most housing right now is a hundred dollars a square foot for construction. That’s what’s happened poststorm. Maybe prestorm you might have been sixty dollars a square foot for housing for ordinary people, and now you’re looking at at least a hundred dollars a square foot. And you’re asking for the land what it would cost them to build a house.

**Creel:** See, the reason we were able to do the Hope VI project before the storm was because we owned the land. We owned it; we didn’t have to buy that land. We had barracks style housing there before, built in the [19]40s and the [19]50s; tore all that down. We wanted to promote home ownership, pride in community. Those were some of the greatest things, and we owned the land, though. But now, what you’re looking at is if John Doe developer comes in town, and forget about casinos. He’s not going to do a casino or a condo. “Hey, I want to do affordable housing. I’m going to provide some affordable housing.” So he’s got to go down there and buy that land, like you said, for that exorbitant price; then he’s got to build it in an environment where construction costs so much. Then he’s got to build it up higher to where he can get flood insurance. And then he’s got to turn around and try to sell it in a community, a section of the city, where I think it was 40 percent of the—and I got the number, and I’ll give you the number. But the annual household income was just so low that even today, with the programs that we have, we’re trying to qualify people to get into houses at Biloxi Housing Authority. We can’t do it because their income level, they can’t pass the credit checks and everything. And the last thing that you want to do is put somebody in a place where it’s not going to work. So what we’re having to do is
the down payment and closing assistance was, I think it was like twenty-five thousand dollars, which is a pretty good sum of money. Now, they’re looking at having to give them anywhere from fifty to sixty thousand dollars for closing and down payment assistance. And then they’re still having some issues with it because their income level wouldn’t be enough to meet the note.

Smith: This area of East Biloxi that was so heavily devastated, if you’d gone back forty or fifty years, you would have seen people in the seafood industry living in that area, a lot of housing at one time was maybe built by seafood factories for their labor.

Creel: It was called row housing. Go ahead. I’m sorry.

Smith: And it becomes privately owned. So this is an area that a lot of elderly people, retired, live, Vietnamese fishing community. So we’re talking about basically while it may be surrounded by casinos, it’s a blue-collar neighborhood.

Creel: It was a blue-collar, older part of the city, and my personal example is a great one. My grandmother was ninety-two years old. And so her house was destroyed by the storm. So the family’s not going to build the house back. So that property’s sitting there vacant right now. And in a lot of cases, you’ve got where the kids have moved away in other parts of the—so they have no interest in building back there. Well, the bottom line is if we’re judged by the way Point Cadet looks today, we don’t think that that’s fair. We said after the storm that some areas of our city were going to build back quicker than others. Some parts of the city were going to take longer, and some parts of the city were never going to look the way they did. And in some cases, that should be that way because one of the things we’ve tried to tell people is we want to build back responsibly. We know that the federal government has given us billions of dollars down here. We know that we've had thousands of volunteers come in the wake of the storm and still here today. The worst thing that we could do is build back just the way we were, put ourself in harm’s way, again, and then the country’s going to look at us the next time a hurricane strikes, and they say, “OK. Hold on. We told you what to do, and you didn’t do it. Now you want us to bail you out again?” Having said that, yeah, that all sounds right and good and everything and wholesome and American. But then you got to look at these constituents when you’re an elected leader, and you got to say, “No. You got to build your house back ten feet higher in the air.” And when you got a woman that’s sixty-five, seventy years old, a retired couple or whatnot, how are they going to be able to get in their house without a rope ladder? So what we tried to tell people was, “Just like before the storm, everybody’s situation was different; everybody’s situation was different, so we’re going to give you some options that see what works best for you.” One of the things that we recommended to people was that some of the neighborhoods pool their money or pool their property to where they could tie it all in together, and they could have a developer that could come in and build a senior retirement center or build something that could be high enough up for people, and their admission into that would be the title to their property.
Smith: That’s one of the Reviving the Renaissance ideas.

Creel: Yeah. See? And so we tried to come up with a number of different avenues for people on the way they could do it. Now, a lot of people asked after the storm, “What about FEMA?” And I remember at one point they asked the mayor, they said, “We understand that Michael Brown’s been fired. What do you think?” And he said, “Well, who’s Michael Brown?” (laughter) What we told people, and we’d been doing a job every year of sending out newsletters to our residents, and one of the things we always told them was we live on a peninsula. It’s a beautiful place to live, but by the same token, there are inherent dangers and risks that come living this close to the water. And we’d always told them that it could be thirty-six, forty-eight hours; it could be three or four days in the worst-case scenario that we’re going to have to be self-sufficient. We’re going to have to be on our own. And it ended up being about seven days is what it ended up being. And what we had always told the media when they were just wanting to drag us into this thing on beating up FEMA, the mayor said that, “We don’t feel that we’re in a position to point fingers at people. We feel that we tried to tell our people we had to be self-sufficient for three to four days.” And then President Bush said, some time after that he said, “Well, I think the federal response could have been more expedient, could have been better.” And then we agreed with (laughter) the president. We figured, “How could you go wrong with that?” But we were always conscious of our national image. And we had seen what was happening in New Orleans. We were careful not to get drawn into that. The national media would ask us, “Did you see what happened to New Orleans? What do you think of this? What do you think of that?” “We’re focusing on the day-to-day issues that we have to deal with here.” “But what about this over in New Orleans?” “Well, what you have to understand about New Orleans,” we finally told them, “is that they have all the interesting things over there to make it more of a compelling story. They had the race issue; they had the federal and local and state response issue. They had the issue of the levees. They had the issue of the Convention Center. They had the issue of people knew this was going to happen for the longest time.” So it had all the issues, and we understand that. If the reporter could go to a train wreck or a train that arrives on time, he’s going to go to the train wreck. As Governor Barbour said, “You never see a story about a plane that lands safely.” So we just kept doing what we were doing, and that media, national spotlight is a double-edged sword, too. It can come back to bite you in a big hurry. But we just have continued to try to deal with the issue. Now, by the way, just yesterday we had what we thought happened with something that is— something big happened yesterday. There was a project out in West Biloxi called Bay Village, and this is one of those mixed use subdivisions that—it was a former golf course, and the golf course was something that was in a covenant where it would remain a golf course for twenty, thirty years, whatever. Well, the covenant expired some time ago. Prior to the storm, there was a move afoot; some people wanted the City to buy it and have a municipal golf course. And people think just because we got all these casinos, we’re flush with money. Well, the mayor didn’t think that it would be the prudent and best use of taxpayer money to buy that golf course. Maybe one day, but not then. So what happened was the developer came forward with this proposal poststorm, and he went to the planning commission three times, and it was
voted down three times. Yesterday he came to the Biloxi City Council, and it was voted; it was approved, and we think that that was something that was very important. And what we think is happening here is a lot of people want things to go back just the way they were. And this happened after Camille; a lot of the leaders were faced with this situation where, “My constituents want to get back in their house just as soon as they can and get their lives back to normal.” And they did that. And some people look back on it today, and they say that a lot of mistakes were made. We should have put more thought into it. And some of the elected leaders today want to do the same thing. We had an issue with one of our council members in East Biloxi where he wanted to help people get back in their houses and build new houses, and he took advantage of the, in a good way, he took advantage of the volunteer efforts that were coming in and helped people build their houses, repair them, and then didn’t get the first permit. So he came to the City, and he wanted the planning department to write a letter saying that this was OK because these people were applying for the homeowner’s grants to try to get reimbursed for some of the materials and everything that they bought. Well, one of the first things that you need for that homeowner’s grant is you need to show where you got a permit in advance and where it was inspected afterwards and where it was built to the flood levels. Fortunately we didn’t have any of them that were not built to the flood levels, none that we’re aware of. But he was told that, “No. We’re not going to write a letter like that because if we write a letter like that, then the National Flood Insurance people are going to say, ‘You were allowing things to be built in a flood zone without the proper permits on the front end. Whether they were done right or not, you’re showing us that you were not doing the proper oversight, which would have been just totally irresponsible.’” So you’re still seeing a lot of tough decisions like that, and you’re going to continue to see them, but we think the decision yesterday to go forward on this Bay Village thing with the houses that are a little bit closer than others and with the streets that are a little bit smaller, and with mixed use in the neighborhood. They asked Mayor Holloway, “What do you think about this?” And he said, “I think with the need we have for housing, I think this is a good project, and I think it needs to go forward.” I think that made a big statement. The council members and probably the mayor, too, in the past, were looking at it like they thought there was a big group of the neighborhood that didn’t want to see that thing happen. I think they started seeing through that, and they saw that it wasn’t that many people in the neighborhood. And frankly, you’re always going to have people in an established neighborhood that are not going to want things in their backyard. It’s just always going to be that way, and it’s the not-in-my-backyard concept. But it was approved yesterday, [and] we think that that might lead to more of that. This is part of this thing they call new urbanism and smart growth, like we must have been having dumb growth in the past. But what this means is is that we don’t dispel all of these ideas that we’re hearing. We have said that we are going to look at them. We’re not going to force them on people, but if a developer wants to come in and do that kind of stuff, we’re not going to say, “No. You got to do it this way.” Some of our concerns were that people, when you put them in close proximity—we saw this with the FEMA trailers. FEMA trailers, the peak in Biloxi was twenty-five hundred FEMA trailers. We’re down to four hundred of them now. But when you put people in close proximity, you’re going to have issues with noise.
You’re going to have domestic things. You’re going to have a whole gamut of issues. I lost my train of thought for a minute.

Smith: You’re trying to talk about the housing problems.

Creel: Oh, yeah. So we figured that if you had that density level as high as that, you’re going to have some inherent problems. Then you’re going to have the fire safety issues. If one house catches on fire, and you got the other one at zero lot line right next to it, you’re going to have problems with that. The streets are smaller, so how are the fire trucks going to get into them, ambulances and everything else? So they were able to do some tweaking on this thing and get it to where it’s going to have a lot of the characteristics of the smart growth stuff that they’re talking about, the new urbanism, and it’s something that the City could live with. So to say that Biloxi does not have vision and does not look at the things that we need to be looking at—condominiums, by the way, that was another big part.

Smith: What’s your response to Andreas Duany’s critique (inaudible)?

Creel: Andreas Duany? Yeah. He was a very strong-willed individual.

Smith: A critique that was in the paper a couple of weeks ago.

Creel: He said that Biloxi was committing urban suicide, and the reason we were committing urban suicide is because we’re not listening to him, who some people would say he’s an elitist. You agree with him, or you’re stupid. We think that he has some good ideas. We also look at Seaside, one of his things that he did down in Florida, and if you want to get, I think it was a two-bedroom unit down there, nine hundred and something thousand dollars, two bedrooms, one and a half baths. Who can afford that? Nine hundred and something thousand dollars. I mean, I just don’t know if we’ve got a market for that here. We’re talking about affordable housing; we’re not talking about—and we had affordable housing, right over here at Biloxi Housing Authority. So that shows you that we were not opposed to these kind of concepts. Gets back into that thing, Reviving the Renaissance, the compelling story. We were doing a lot of things right. We’re not utopia. We’re not perfect, but we were doing a lot of things right. A lot of people are watching how many casinos we’re going to have in Biloxi. There’s a big issue coming up with this proposal; it’s now called South Beach Casino and Resort. It had been called R.W. Development. That’s the company doing it. What they want to do is going back in West Biloxi, it was an area—in our colorful and long history, we actually had casinos here before they were legal, and they were on land. And the only thing they weren’t getting out of it was taxes. And that all ended when the Keifoffer(? ) Hearings came to Keesler Air Force Base in Hurricane Camille. I mean, they had signage and everything, and in the bus station, slot machines. And it was just not uncommon, the laissez-faire attitude of the day. Well, what the move afoot now is is to try to reinvigorate the so-called strip area of West Biloxi. Now, the city council had made part of this area right north of the beach, they made it waterfront at a time years ago, but the deal was, how could you
have a floating casino because you had the beach south of it? And the secretary of state at the time said, “I am not going to allow anybody to build anything across that beach. That’s in the public domain, in the public trust.” So the City eventually did away with the waterfront zoning for that area, and the reason it was the waterfront zoning is that allowed people to build hotels next to a casino, but they couldn’t have the casino because it was across from the beach. Well, now, with the eight-hundred-foot rule, it’s going to be interesting to see what happens because the mayor had said in the past on a project at the Tivoli down here, he said that the beach has always been a good defining factor in where we locate casinos. You couldn’t be south of the beach, so you ought to not be able to be north of the beach. Also we’ve got all this work we did on Back Bay Boulevard along Back Bay where land is already zoned for casinos. If we allow them to come on front beach, then they’re never going to want to go on Back Bay where the land’s already zoned. And finally, he said, “It creates an unlevel playing field. You couldn’t do this before the storm, and we had a bunch of businesses come in, casinos, that invested money and didn’t reinvest it after the storm, and now we’re going to let somebody else do something that these others couldn’t do? It’s just not right; it’s not fair.” Based on those three things, he vetoed the Tivoli proposal, which was going to be more than a billion dollars and create four thousand jobs or how many ever, and then be an economic engine for the City. And there were a number of residents who were for it, and the city council passed it, and the mayor vetoed it, and the veto has stuck. Now people are wondering what he’s going to do with this other proposal. The difference here is the Tivoli, the guy bought some land, but he had not started any kind of construction. You know, a lot of people say, “Why do you need a casino? Why don’t you build everything you want to build with the beautiful hotel and the restaurants? Why do you need a casino?” And he figured that’s what he needed to make this thing work. So on this thing in West Biloxi, it’s going to be a key decision in how our city’s going to look in the future as far as land use.

Smith: This would be around Veterans Avenue.

Creel: Be on the north side of Veterans Avenue, ironically and coincidentally and whatever else, place where Gus Steven’s Supper Club was located, where Jayne Mansfield gave her last public performance. And it all gets back into, see, we’re talking about looking at the things we were doing right in the past. Were we doing that right in the past? I don’t know, but we apparently had casinos up in that area. So the difference with this thing up here with R.W. Development, number one, he’s got stuff coming out of the ground. Number two is this; the Cox(?) ruling, the federal court cases back in the civil rights era said that the beach was going to be in a public trust, and people would have repairing rights, as I understand it, but you cannot fence off parts of the beach. You can’t have any construction on the beach except for the construction that’s already there, the areas that are already developed. So the great thing about that was it always assured that we were going to have that beach. The other thing it did was it limited where there could be development south of Highway 90, and it was only going to be in the areas like from where the Beau Rivage is now, where we had restaurants and so forth to where the seafood factories were and so forth
around Point Cadet. And the only other area, from Treasure Bay down to Rodenberg, that’s the only stretch besides Point Cadet where there is development south of Highway 90. So one of the things that people are probably going to hang their hat on, and the mayor may very well do this, too. He may say that this case is different because the developer owns land south of the highway. Now other people are going to say, “Yeah, mayor, but you said the beach was the defining factor, and still got beach south of that spot over there.” He’s hearing people say and seeing it for himself, too, that parts of the city aren’t coming back as fast as he thinks they should. So he may very well go that way. It’s going to be one of these decisions that’s going to have long-term effects on the character and the look of the city. And one of the great things we always reminded Governor Barbour about publicly, Governor Barbour had the commission; he had Andreas Duany; he had all these people come in, Jim Barksdale(?), great job, volunteering all their—I don’t know if Duany volunteered, but Barksdale came in and volunteered a lot, and he gave a lot of his own money. But the governor always said, “These are just ideas. The local communities are going to decide how they’re going to look in the future.” And we took that as our charge to where we didn’t have to embrace all the stuff with the charrettes. We were able to dissect it and go over all of it and see what was right, but this issue over here with R.W. Development and that proposed casino site over there in West Biloxi it’s going to have ramifications with the legislature. See what they’re going to do. We always have to remember—and we were worried about this before the storm—there are more of them than there are of us. There’s like twelve of the eighty-two counties that have gaming, gambling, in Mississippi. So these other legislators that represent all these other counties, they see all that gaming revenue coming in, and even though it’s a 12 percent tax structure, 12 percent tax, 8 percent of it goes to the state, and 4 percent is shared by the local community where the gaming is. They’re already getting the lion’s share. Governor Barbour had always said that he is not going to raise anybody’s taxes while he’s governor. Well, if he ever needed some money, one thing that he could do without raising anybody’s taxes, is he could look at that formula that’s 12 percent, and he could say, “Well, instead of it being 8 percent coming to the state, I’d like for it to be 9 percent coming to the state. And we would be down here, and everybody would look at us from across the state and say, “Well, hey, y’all have been fat and happy for years. You don’t need this money.” But the reason we need this money is to provide the quality of life that we promised people we were going to provide them before casinos came here. We promised them we were going to do public education, that we were going to lower taxes, we were going to create jobs, and we were going to do parks and recreation. We were going to improve their quality of life, and it takes money to do that.

**Smith:** What’s happened with the revenue streams?

**Creel:** Oh, the revenue streams are just, I mean, it’s just amazing, the casino industry. And it’s an anomaly. I mean, where is this money coming from? I don’t know. They asked a couple of the casino people, like in January [or] February after the storm, they said, “They’re doing all this revenue. Are these people spending federal money? Are they taking their homeowner’s grants? Are they taking their insurance settlements,
and are they going to blow it in a casino?” And what the casino people told them was number one, they didn’t cash checks from banks, particularly that big. But that doesn’t mean you can’t go get it cashed at a—if somebody’s going to abuse something, they’re going to abuse it, and there ain’t much you can do. As hard as it is for people to get that money, I would hope that they’re smarter than doing that. Having said all of that, that’s the only thing going on right here.

Smith: Now, the poorest of the poor, though, as far as the housing grants, they’ve really not gotten to their money. Is that true based on the way the MDA [Mississippi Development Authority] grant program work (inaudible)?

Creel: Part of the problem—

Smith: You’re too poor to have insurance; you’re kind of like at the back of the line as far as housing grants. So that’s really just now beginning to flow to a lot of people.

Creel: What they did first in the homeowner’s grant program was they said, “OK.” And my parents are a perfect example. My dad was seventy-five years old and retired. And I remember it was emotional because they had a TV reporter that came over from WWL in New Orleans, and he was interviewing the mayor. And all these people were complaining about insurance and these companies not paying. (brief interruption) He said, “I’m looking for somebody that”—he says, “What’s your take on this insurance issue, mayor, with this wind versus flood thing?”

Smith: Is this your father?

Creel: He was asking the mayor; the reporter was. And so the mayor said, he said, “Well, I’ll tell you what.” He said, “If they’re in the insurance business, they need to pay. They’ve been collecting all these premiums all these years, and,” he said, “they got insurance on top of insurance. They take your premiums, and then they buy insurance from another company. They got layers.” And he said, “If they’re in the business of insurance, then they need to pay, or they need to get out of the business.” He was very forceful. And so then the reporter talked to me later; and he said he was looking for, to take it out of city hall and interview somebody. And I said, “Well, they’re all over.” (laughter) “Just stop anywhere. People are having this issue.” And so I ended up, I called my dad and asked him would he help me with this. And they got five feet of water in their house. They are not in a flood zone. They didn’t have flood insurance. Their house was paid for. So I took the reporter over there, and my dad spent a day; every day he would sit on the front porch, (laughter) and he would gut one room every day. And he hired a couple of Vietnamese guys to come over and help him. And they would have a wheelbarrow, coming in and out of the front door. And they take all the sheetrock off, and then just go through the process, all the mud, and it’s everything everybody—my dad was so depressed for like four or five days after the storm, and my little sister finally told him, she said, “Hey. You need to get over it. You’re in the same boat as everybody else.” And I took that reporter over to talk to him, and I left. I didn’t stay. And so the reporter called me an hour later, and...
he was on his way back to New Orleans, and he said, “I want to thank you.” He said, “That worked out really well.” And I said, “What did he say?” And he said, “Well, he told his story briefly.” And he said, “But it was really great,” which kind of scared me. I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, he did OK.” And then he stopped. Well, what he told them was that, he said, “I’m seventy-five years old.” And he said that, “My house was paid for. I’m retired.” He said, “Now, I got to go back in debt because I got twelve thousand dollars from my insurance company.” You know? That’s (laughter) all he got. And what—

Smith: He got payment for wind probably (inaudible).

Creel: Wind and no water.

Smith: (Inaudible) roof or whatever might have happened from roof damage.

Creel: Yeah, [and] it was nowhere near the amount of money, but what he did was he applied for that homeowner’s grant. And what he ended up getting was—they ended up—they called it savings. My mom and dad called it savings. I called it inheritance. (laughter) But I’m just so glad. I don’t know how much money they got in the bank; I have no idea, but I do know that they ended up spending a total of about eighty thousand dollars on getting their house back to the way it was. And we’re not talking about anything—so what happened was they had the twelve thousand dollars, and then they went and borrowed money through, I don’t know if it was SBA [Small Business Administration] or whatever. So they borrowed money, and then the homeowner’s grant came through. So they had twelve thousand dollars, and then they borrowed money, and then they went into savings and took about thirty thousand dollars out of their savings. Well, what they ended up getting was the—oh, and by the way, on the loan, they qualified for up to, I think, a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars to be able to borrow. They didn’t need that much. They told them how much they needed, which I forget what the heck it was; might have been sixty-thousand, whatever. So the amount of the payments that they were going to have to start making in four months was not going to be based on the amount of money that they borrowed. It was going to be based on the amount of money that they were eligible to—you follow what I’m saying? Instead of having to pay a note for a sixty-thousand-dollar loan, they were going to have to pay a note for what they qualified for, like a hundred and twenty thousand dollars. And it was going to be, I forget what, seven or eight hundred dollars a month he was going to have to pay on a fixed income. So he told that reporter, he said, “I’m seventy-five years old, and I’m retired. Now, I got to go back in debt.” And his face kind of evaporated, and he walked off. And that was the end of it. But it told people in specific terms how it was impacting people. But on the homeowner’s grant program, they applied for it, and then they got the amount of money to pay off. They owed, I think, fourteen hundred dollars or whatever. In other words, the amount of money was just that they qualified for and got from a homeowner’s grant program, and then they came back and did it, reassessed them, as they did with a lot of them. They came back and reassessed them, and they ended up getting enough money to put back into their savings. So they were just—now, for me to sit here and say, “So they
were whole again,” well, they might have been whole again, but they had to go through all of that, of losing everything, not just them, everybody. But there are some other things that you can’t replace. I mean, the pictures of me as a child, the pictures of them taking us on vacations as children, my grandmother [who] just died, their wedding pictures, you lose all of that stuff. And what I’ve told people over and over again—and I guess it’s the only way I can look at it—is it gave us a new appreciation for what’s important, and this is hard to say, but it’s not your house, it’s not your car, it’s not your clothes. It’s just being alive and still having your family and your friends. [And] I say that; I don’t know if I really believe that (laughter), but it’s the only thing that I can hold onto, that that’s what God has given us with this is that a new appreciation, and frankly a new appreciation for all the people that have come here to help us and then the ones that have come and never left. I could not imagine; I’ve told the mayor before, I said, “Jeez, I hope that if we ever see a situation where something befalls some of these communities that have helped us, I hope that we’re as stand-up as they are.” And we were with one that was hit by a tornado over in Alabama a while back; we gave them ten thousand dollars. And then the sad, not the sad part, the heartwarming part was the Atlanta Fire Department sent over three trucks, and about—I don’t know—sixty men. They were here for like three weeks, and they have like a thousand-member fire department. So the chief knew our chief, and he said, “Hey, we’re coming over to help y’all.” And so what they did was they were able, while our men were out turning off all these water, broken water pipes, these men were able to answer calls or whatever. And so anyway what they ended up doing was I interviewed one of them for this documentary we did, and this guy said that, he said, “It’s changed my life.” He said, “To see people who have lost so much and yet still have such a good attitude, a good outlook,” and he said, “and they look at you like you’re a victim.” (laughter) Like, “We’re sorry you have to go through all this while you’re here to help us.” He said, “It’s just changed my life.” And he came back at the first or second anniversary, and he was glad to see. We don’t see the progress because we’re here every day. We don’t see it. And we tell people now that we have a milestone, large or small, each and every day. It might be the local, little barber shop opening; it might be John Doe getting back in his house. It might be Dillard’s reopening. And to give you an idea of the vibrancy of this economy, or just maybe how hungry people are to go shopping (laughter), Dillard’s opened up, the store here in Biloxi, at Edgewater Mall, and at the same time, they opened up a store [in] suburban Houston, [and] they opened up a store in Ocala, Florida. And where was the other one? Georgia, somewhere in Georgia.

Smith: And this is just within the last week or so, Dillard’s opened?

Creel: Yeah. So they opened up three other stores, suburban Houston, I think; outside of Atlanta, I believe, and then the other one’s in Ocala, Florida, and they opened up this one here, all at the same time. And I was telling the mayor that I talked to Dillard’s. And he said, “What? That this was the highest one?” And I said, “Yeah, this was the highest one.” I said, “If you add up all of the other three, (laughter) this one still did more in sales than the other three combined.” Now why is that? I mean, I don’t know. I mean, but it’s great to see stuff like that. On these casinos, you asked
about the revenue. And on the revenue, one of the things that kind of surprised us was
we knew we were going to take what we thought was going to be a dramatic hit. We
thought we were going to take a dramatic hit on the property taxes because what
happened on property taxes was that—

Smith: Wiped out a lot of houses.

Creel: Yeah, wiped out a lot of houses. And whenever you saw that level of
destruction out there—I got to get one thing here, Pat. (brief pause) In the future
years we were going to see people who were going to be having—our tax revenue to
be able to do things was going to be down. But what happened in Biloxi was that we
had a number of improvements that had been made right before the storm, and then in
the rebuilding, where the IP [Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino] and the Isle of Capri
and the Palace were all able to get back online right away, the taxes from those
improvements were able to help us out. So in a nutshell where we’re at on taxes right
now, the casinos have been doing gangbusters business, the first time in the fifteen-
year history of gaming that the casinos grossed more than a billion dollars in a
calendar year. Prior to this, the big-time was 911 million dollars in 2004. So in 2007,
they did that much money. Now, as far as some of the other things, our government
here in Biloxi operates on three revenue sources. Number one is the casino gaming
revenue, which makes up more than a third of our annual operating budget; so a little
over twenty million a year is how much we get from the casinos. The second thing is
sales tax; the sales tax revenue comes out to be about 22 [or] 23 percent. When you
add up the gaming taxes and the sales taxes prior to the storm, they were accounting
for 59 percent of our budget. Property taxes were less than 20 percent of our overall
budget. So this gets back to what I was telling you; the rest of the state looks at this
and says, “Well, you’ve been able to lower taxes. You ought to have to be
maintaining taxes like the rest of us in the state are.” But we look at it like it’s
working, and it’s working for the entire State of Mississippi. So our sales tax is—I
wanted to tell you where we were on those. Property tax revenue was down in [20]06,
[20]07 because of Katrina damage to real and personal property, but we’re anticipating
revenue for FY [fiscal year] [20]07, [20]08 is going to rebound, and based on the size
and the amount of development that is under construction right now or is in the
planning stages, we think that our property taxes are either going to be equal to or
greater than they were before Hurricane Katrina. The other big one is sales tax
October 1 of [20]07 to September 31 of [20]08. We’re anticipating that revenue to be
91 percent of what it was before the storm. Now, gee, it sounds like everything is
going back to normal. Couldn’t be further from the case. On the casino resort hotels
we have, probably 65 [to] 70 percent of them are back. But on the mom-and-pop
hotels, only about 25 percent of those are back. So we have about half of the hotel
rooms that we had prior to the storm, but the makeup is totally skewed. You know
what I’m saying? The small mom-and-pops didn’t have the level of finance, didn’t
have the financial wherewithal that these casinos had. We don’t know if they’re ever—
Smith: The flood insurance for them, if you’ve got one building that’s two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, that’s it. And if you didn’t have deep pockets, you’re in trouble.

Creel: They may never come back. The other problem that we’re seeing, by the way, is we had a number of chain restaurants along our front beach. We had the O’Charley’s. We had Ruby Tuesday. We had Denney’s. And in a lot of cases, these particular locations were leading the chain in the amount of revenue they were doing for the chain. The Hooters, the Mexican restaurant that was right next to Hooter’s, I forget the name of it. But anyway, here’s the problem that we’re having now. These people who came in and built these things, the chains, they had long-term leases. So they built them fifteen years ago. Well, now, they’re wiped out. Before they’re going to come in and build again, they want to get another long-term lease, or they’re not going to make the commitment. Well, you remember what I was telling you about the cost of property? (laughter) So these property owners want all this big money, and then they’re going to have the issues—by the way, the flood construction rate and so forth, it’s not as bad on commercial property. I’m talking about how high you got to elevate. It’s not as bad on commercial property because what FEMA does with these flood elevations; they say, “Well, John Doe Property Owner’s going to say, ‘Well, gee, if I got to build up that high, it’s going to make it hard for me to build back.’” That’s the whole purpose of the elevations. That’s what they want to do. They want to make it hard for you to build back because they don’t want to have to keep going through these repetitive losses. One of our issues right now is we’re hoping that that thing is going to work out with these restaurants. When it will, we don’t know, but with time, the property values—they’re way out of whack right now. People have the perception that their property is worth more than it really is. And we can’t tell them. I mean, it’s the American system. The other thing that we’re hoping is going to work out is—

Smith: What kind of code is commercial property getting so far as elevation issue?

Creel: I don’t know. I don’t know the answers to that. You’re getting outside my level of expertise, and it doesn’t take long to get outside my level of expertise. I know we need to wrap this thing up. I think you do. I’m OK. What haven’t I covered?

Smith: I wanted to ask you about public infrastructure. You had school buildings destroyed. You had sewage and water systems destroyed, all of that stuff that kind of falls under the Stafford Act. And try to get you to talk to me a little bit about your dilemmas with public infrastructure recovery.

Creel: As I understand with the—and by the way, with FEMA, we have not had one instance where we haven’t been able to come to some kind of agreement with FEMA. We did this debris removal thing; I mentioned it earlier, three million cubic yards of debris. That’s enough debris to cover a football field, and it would stand like a hundred and forty stories high. The Beau Rivage is only thirty stories high. So that’s the amount. And it was like eighty million dollars the thing cost. We had no issues
with FEMA on how we oversaw that, how we got the money. FEMA’s got a lot of paperwork that you’ve got to go through. You got a lot of hoops to jump through, but if you learn what they are, and you do things the way they want it done, the problem with FEMA that I’ve seen is that—and I don’t know the answer. But it seemed like every two weeks we would get new people in. And sometimes those people would have a different interpretation than the first guy that was there. And I’m talking about the worker-bee people who come to the meetings and say, “OK. To get money to rebuild this visitor’s center, here’s what you got to do. You got to make sure that it’s built to the flood level. And here’s what’ll qualify, and here’s what won’t qualify, etcetera. A great example was we wanted to build these new fishing piers here on—they were the bridges, the former bridges, over there by the Palace Casino on Point Cadet, and the one on Back Bay. Both of them were destroyed, but they were bridges where we’d taken the draws out, and people could go out fishing on them. They could actually drive on them. Well, there was so much success with the Biloxi Bay Bridge under this concept called Design Build where you don’t wait to get the whole thing finished. You go ahead and start construction, and you just streamline the process. Worked so great on that, we wanted to do it on this other (inaudible). FEMA said, “No. We can’t do it.” Right now we got—I don’t know—four or five piers that were destroyed, one of the most prominent ones, the Lighthouse Pier. There was a pier right over here underneath the I-110 bridge that was made of concrete, concrete pilings, and it still had some wood on it, but it survived the storm. We’ve rebuilt the Lighthouse Pier three or four times, going back to Hurricane Georges and even before that. So what we’re asking FEMA is, “Hey, instead of us keeping, rebuilding this thing wooden, why don’t we go concrete?” Still waiting on an answer; still waiting on it. Now, a lot of people are going to look, and they’re going to say—and the media do it, residents will do it. “OK. It’s been three years since the storm, coming up, but let’s not forget, the first twelve to fourteen months, we were digging out of all these mounds of debris. We were trying to get back the water and the sewer, and the basic services that you need. And the power company, in my opinion, has been a shining example of getting in there and getting things done. Ten days, all the power to people who could receive power, if they had some kind of structural damage, or if—the general rule as I understand it was, if your meter was knocked off the house, well, then, you were going to be disconnected until you dealt with some things. But on infrastructure, we’re still waiting to see; we’re still under [a] state of emergency here in Biloxi, and today is March 17, 18, whatever.

Smith: March 19.

Creel: How many ever months after the storm. Probably the longest time, I would bet this is the longest state of emergency ever, and what a state of emergency allows to happen is the mayor has what’s known as extraordinary power. He can take action. If we need to go on private property to protect life or property, he can order our people to do that. Typically under state law, you can’t do that. If he needs to go out and buy something in an emergency, he can do that. Still has to be approved by the city council on the back end, but it gives him more authority, and it gives our city workers
more authority. But people say, “Well, gee, it’s been so long. Why are you still under a state of emergency?” The reason we’re under a state of emergency is because we have these things along the front beach. And I always wondered why they were on the front beach. They’re call lift stations. And what a lift station does is it pumps waste water to the treatment plant, and the treatment plant at Keegan’s Bayou or in West Biloxi, one of those two. And it’s imperative that these lift stations do this because otherwise the sewage will back up in your house or your business. So I’ve always wondered, “How come sometimes we have to close the beach because these lift stations overflow?” This goes back to before the storm, too. Why do we have them on the beach? It just doesn’t make sense to me. Why not put them somewhere where they’re not—they have to be at the lowest point to serve their purpose. So that’s why they’re at the—there’s always an answer, and that is the answer. Well, today, as I understand it, we’re still waiting to hear from FEMA on how high up we need to build these lift stations so that the electrical panels are not going to be susceptible to future storm surges and whether or not we need to relocate them or figure out a way to relocate them. So meanwhile, while we’re waiting to hear from that from FEMA, we still have temporary pumps, temporary generators that are at these things down there. That means that our public works people have to go down there two or three times a day to make sure these things are operating, and they have to refuel them every time they go down there. For several, as the mayor would say, several, several months after the storm, our public works director came to the conclusion that, “Hey, why don’t we, instead of us paying this rental fee, which FEMA, you’re reimbursing us for, and that’s great, but we could have bought the thing two times for what we’re paying on rental.” Well, I think it goes back to this whole thing’s unprecedented. FEMA might tell you, “Well, that’s just a temporary thing so why, we can’t let you buy it because what happens when you don’t need it anymore? You’re coming out better than you were before.”

Smith: Stafford Act is not supposed to let you come out better.

Creel: Right. It’s supposed to just be your last resort. After you exhaust your insurance, then you go to FEMA, for reimbursement. People don’t understand that FEMA’s not the local bank. FEMA’s where you go for last resort. So we run into that, and then the other thing that we run into is, the mayor’s great at finding money in different places, so you got the FEMA money working on what—this acronym that everybody knows now, PW, project worksheet. Everything you want to do has to have a project worksheet. There’s another thing called, apparently it’s an improvement, and what you’re doing under this improvement project is we’ve got a couple [of] senior, we had a senior citizen’s center down on Point Cadet that was destroyed. We had a warehouse down on Point Cadet that was destroyed. So we get credit for those things, and the amount of money that we get for those things that were destroyed, we’re not going to build them back. What we’re going to do is we’re going to build them somewhere else where it’s higher, higher ground, and we’re going to have multi-uses in this one facility. So we’ve had to explain to FEMA how we’re doing that, and it takes time because they’ve got to justify to whoever they’re bosses are with FEMA, here’s why they did this; here’s how it’s saving the American
taxpayers money. We know, by the way, that there’s going to be an inspector general that’s going to come through, and he’s going to look at everything we’ve done. And that’s one thing that’s always been said about A.J. Holloway, is he doesn’t mess with money, and he makes sure that it’s done right. The biggest knock on him before this storm was he wasn’t spending money fast enough. Now, where else in the country have you ever heard about a politician that’s not spending money fast enough? So that’s some of the things we’re—the other thing—OK. So we get the FEMA money. Well, meanwhile he reached out to the Federal Highway Administration to help us with the Popps Ferry Bridge and MDOT [Mississippi Department of Transportation] reached out to the Federal Highway Administration, and they’re using Federal Highway Administration money to rebuild the Biloxi Bay Bridge, and they’re using a combination of sources, as I understand it, to rebuild Highway 90. FEMA says you got to build it back just the way it was; can’t have any improvements. To make you whole again, is the word they always use, from what I understand. [The] Federal Highway Administration says, “If you’re going to use our money, you need to build it up to today’s standards. Where you had three-foot sidewalks, we want five-foot sidewalks now. So you run into all of those things, and then some people said to MDOT, and MDOT, I think the media gives them a bad rap because MDOT—and they wanted Wayne Brown out of office. Wayne Brown, MDOT was the way it was before Wayne Brown got there. In fact, you had the two previous commissioners who went to jail for shenanigans. Wayne Brown is at least honest, apparently. So Wayne Brown was taking all the heat on, “OK. So you did the Biloxi Bay Bridge, and then all of a sudden, you’re tearing up Highway 90 on Point Cadet. How come you weren’t doing the work on Highway 90 before the bridge opened? Because you didn’t have a lot of traffic. That’s just the stupidest thing. We don’t understand. You just apparently aren’t thinking.” That’s what the knock on him was. Lo and behold, there are two different funding sources to do this stuff. You can’t start doing the work until you know you’re going to get that money. Some people might tell you, “Oh, yeah. We’ll get you that money.” And then you go borrow money or do whatever and start the work and stuff, well, then if something, if [there is] some kind of glitch in Congress or whatever and you don’t get the money, you’re in big trouble. So all of them, I think, are trying to do the prudent thing, and they’re trying to serve all these masters, whether it’s FEMA, whether it’s HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. HUD has always been a bureaucratic thing. And you’ve got some people; you’re going to have different philosophies. You’re going to have some people that say that the government should be able to do all things for all people. And then you’re going to have some people that say, “No. The government cannot do all things for all people.” So you’re going to run into that, too. We talked about the Mississippi Development Authority and its housing program. The first thing that the governor did with the program was he said, “OK. We’re going to help the people who have suffered, who were doing the responsible thing. We’re going to help the people who didn’t have flood insurance because they didn’t live in a flood zone. We’re going to help them first. The second group of people we’re going to help are people who lived in a flood zone and had flood insurance, and it’s not covering all of their things.” And the thing has been called from day one a homeowner’s grant program. Half of the people in East Biloxi were renting, so they were not even going to get anything from
that first part. Well, now, they’re starting to roll out the other programs where they’re going to help the people who were renting, where they were going to help the people who lived in a flood zone but didn’t have flood insurance. So that’s at least how I see it. Now, it just doesn’t happen—

Smith: That makes things in East Biloxi kind of slow because of (inaudible).

Creel: In East Biloxi, some of the people may not even decide to build back, period.

Smith: Let me ask you about the Highway 90 project. Gulfport has had some difficulties because they’ve got to move, evidently, sewage lines that now, the highway department won’t let you put the sewage lines under Highway 90. So they’ve got to move. And so you’ve got a little issue with FEMA, “Will you approve the redesign? It’s going to cost more. It’s not going to be exactly what was there.” And so there’s a little hang-up. Is there—

Creel: They’re saying there’s a little hang-up. Now, they’re saying it’s going to cost seven million dollars. It could cost seven million dollars. And as I recall, Gulfport was beating up on MDOT before the storm. “We don’t want this elevated roadway. We don’t want this. We don’t want that.” Yet they voted in favor of it prior to the current administration over there. I mean, somebody in Gulfport signed off on that thing.

Smith: Well, in the case of [Highway] 90, this is (inaudible).

Creel: Yeah. I was going to get to [Highway] 90. OK.

Smith: Katrina damage and sewage infrastructure has got to be moved.

Creel: Sewage lines under Highway 90, it’s got to be moved because when you think about it, they’ve got all that development south of the highway. What’s south of the highway? The beach. I mean, how much can you—

Smith: Well, is Biloxi having to move sewage out from under [Highway] 90?

Creel: OK. I was being sarcastic; I was being sarcastic. There are some cases where you can move it out. What they’re saying is, they would rather not have any under there. And by the way, it gets back into that thing: FEMA’s saying, “Build it back the way it was. Don’t improve.” And then federal highway says, “We don’t want anything under there.” Well, how’s Beau Rivage going to operate? How’s the new Margaritaville going to operate? We’ve got to have some under there. So what we’re saying is this; the last thing in the world the City of Biloxi wants to do is tear up a newly paved Highway 90. We’re going to look at some measures that we were using effectively before the storm, and we’re still using now. There’s a tremendous utility corridor under Highway 90 at Reynar(?) Street right now, and it’s this process called
jacking and boring where you can dig a tunnel—and I don’t mean it’s a tunnel you can
drive a car in, but it’s a tunnel that’s big enough to handle the sewer lines that need to
go under there in New Orleans. They have to go under there. There’s no other way to
do it. Where they’re going to run into trouble is this. MDOT’s not buying any new
right-of-way on the north side of Highway 90. So if you’ve got sewer lines that are
north of Highway 90, right in that little bit on side of the roadway, probably going to
have to tear up some sidewalks, to be honest with you. See, they’re down there. The
reason they didn’t do the sidewalks and do the rebuilding of Highway 90 in East
Biloxi before the bridge opened is because they didn’t have money. (laughter) They
hadn’t been given the money yet. So I think they would rather have done that, too.
Now, right now they got that project underway where they’re building the new curbs,
the new gutters; they’re replacing storm drains where they need to, and they’re putting
in new sidewalks. We may very well have some sewer lines that are under those, or
even water lines, as far as I know. And it’s a pretty tight area. They cannot build
those eight-foot sidewalks or six-foot sidewalks everywhere. In some places they
have to leave them three feet. And they’ve said they’re not buying any more right-of-
way. Nobody gave them money to buy any more right-of-way, to build a utility
corridor in there because, “build it back the way it was, and by the way we’re giving
you this money to improve the roadway, not buy.” And those property owners, what
do you think they’re going to sell it for? A lot of money.

Smith: So that comes back on an issue of whether things (inaudible).

Creel: By the way, we don’t have the money yet. Right now, we’ve got our biggest
thing pending with FEMA, right now. Originally FEMA told us we were going to
have to build back things the way they were. Then FEMA came back, and we were
sitting here, watching; Waveland’s rebuilding everything that went under water. So is
Pass Christian. So the mayor went back to FEMA, and David Staling(?) went back to
FEMA and said, “Hold on. You’re telling us that we’re only going to be able to
replace what was there, and what we’re seeing over here in Long Beach and Waveland
and Bay St. Louis, they’re rebuilding every bit of infrastructure that went under water.
Water, sewer, utilities, the roadway, the sidewalks. We don’t think that’s fair.” And
so then they had to come back and tell us that, yes, we can do that. But they haven’t
even told us yet. The request by the way is three hundred and fifty-five million
dollars, and it’s all of the areas of Biloxi that went under water. We’re still waiting to
hear whether or not they’re going to improve that. Meanwhile, FEMA’s got the
contracts in place, and they’re rebuilding Highway 90. So on one hand, MDOT could
say, “Well, we don’t want to run into this issue where we’re going to have to come
back and see these cities tear up these sidewalks or this roadway, so we’re going to
wait. We’re going to wait to redo Highway 90.” And then people are going to say,
“Why in the hell didn’t you do this?” You know? And we don’t know when we’re
going to get the OK from FEMA on this three hundred and fifty-five million dollars.
And by the way it says three hundred and fifty-five million dollars. The Biloxi
Community Center that we were able to redo over here, as best I can recall, FEMA
said that they thought it was going to be, I think, nine hundred thousand dollars—it
might have been seven hundred thousand dollars—just to bring it back to the way it
was. Well, some of the things we had to do, was number one—we thought we had to
do it, and we said we were going to do it—the building was built in 1960; didn’t have
an elevator, so we were going to build an elevator. It didn’t have the specified ramp
size.

Smith: It’s absolute federal law now that you have to do that.

Creel: Exactly, but they weren’t going to pay for it. (laughter) That’s your problem;
you didn’t have it to start with. But it predated the—so the whole project ended up
being, I think it was like 2.7 million dollars. We ended up having to pay a lot of the
money, but the problem was is when you put the durn thing out for bids, that nine
hundred thousand dollars that FEMA or seven hundred thousand FEMA said it was
going to cost, they were using the basic standards that are prevalent in the construction
field, like nationwide or in the southern region. Those numbers [are] a little different
now because of this environment of supply and demand we’re in. So what we have to
do is, “OK. That’s what you say it is. We’re going to put it out for bids.” Then when
we put it out for bids, then we have to go to FEMA and say, “OK. Here are the top
three bids, and if you’ll notice, it’s not that one’s way up here and one’s way down
here. They’re all in a pretty tight line of where they are there. And there’s no
shenanigans going on because these contractors want the work, too. So they’re going
to try to outbid each other, but by the same token, they know the supply and demand
and the impacts of this market that we’re in. So those are some of the federal issues.
We don’t think it’s going to be as bad as what it’s being made out to be in Gulfport
right now. We also know that MDOT’s an easy punching bag. If the mayor was to
tell me to put out a press release that we got a problem with MDOT, and the traffic
signals aren’t synchronized or whatever, well, that would be all over the front page.
Here’s another example of how MDOT’s not doing their job. [And] MDOT in some
cases definitely, I mean, they got like, a what? A twenty-million-dollar whatever it is
administration building up there in Jackson. There was the big thing about how
MDOT’s got a helicopter, and they were blaming all this on Wayne Brown. Wayne
Brown said, “That thing was built before I was elected. And the helicopter, I’ve never
even been on it.” But there are some things that they could have done better just like
there are some things we could have done better. But I think Gulfport’s overreacting.
We have more development south of Highway 90 than they do, and we’re not bitching
about it. And frankly if we had a reason to bitch about it, I think we probably would.
But we found—

Smith: What about the schools, reconstruction of the destroyed schools?

Creel: Well, then you’ve got another touch of irony. The schools that we had built—
I told you we built three new elementary schools and a new high school. Two of the
schools were two years old, ten-million-dollar schools, Nichols Elementary over here
and Gorenflo. Both of them sustained between three and five feet of water.
Everything in the schools was destroyed. I don’t know if the school system, where
they’re at on their—oh, you didn’t let me tell you what the other great idea was prior
to the storm, how we were better prepared for this storm than any other storm. First
thing was we had started to make progress on having the PUSH contract in place. Second thing was we had equipment staged all around the city. And the third thing was something that the mayor had been looking at for several months. You know what it is.

**Smith:** The insurance on (inaudible).

**Creel:** The insurance on the gaming revenue. So that’s why we were better prepared. But could we have done more? Maybe we could have. But on the schools, I don’t know how the school has worked out its stuff with FEMA; that I don’t know. But here’s what the school’s biggest issue is right now, far outweighing that. What the biggest issue is, what schools are going to come back and have the population? Nichols Elementary School, if you’re in an airplane, and you’re looking at this East Biloxi area, it looks like these two schools are in the shadow of each other. Well, the fact of the matter is, they both had students in them. I don’t know what their capacity was or where they were in that capacity, but right now, I think they’re like, one of them I think’s at 50 [percent], and I think one’s at 30 percent. What they’ve had to do is—they didn’t have to do it; it was fortunate that it worked out this way. They’re housing the Boys and Girls Club in the two schools in the areas that aren’t being used. And the school’s perplexing problem right now is, they have a lot of students in North Biloxi, and do they sell this land over here to, I don’t know, whoever would want to buy it with these new buildings on them, like maybe Salvation Army or somebody? I don’t know. Or the Boys and Girls Club? And then what happens if the area rebuilds? So what they’re doing right now is they’re not doing anything. They’re waiting to see. They’re watching Keesler Air Force Base, which this month they’re moving the first families into the largest military construction housing program in the history of the Air Force; 1067 housing units they’re building. I want to say it was five hundred and something million dollars, but I could be wrong on that one. But it’s something that there’s no easy answer to.

**Smith:** Is the school system anticipating—can you look and see where the population loss may trigger layoffs in the school system?

**Creel:** No. They have not said that they’re looking at anything (inaudible) layoffs. In fact what they’re looking to do is expand the high school right now, and the reason that they want to expand the high school is because they want to move the ninth grade. They want to have a shift in the way they’re doing things. Right now, one of the things that a school is graded on is its dropout rate, and they start tracking the students that drop out from the ninth grade. They will look at how many students are in the ninth grade this year, and then they’ll look three years later. Forget if the students moved or anything; they don’t take that into account. Well, the high school principal says, “Well, I’m being counted against something that I don’t even have any control over. The ninth grade’s in the junior high.” So what they’re looking to do—and they have decided to do it—they’re moving the ninth grade to the high school, about four hundred and something students. And it’s going to be a fourteen million dollar expansion at the high school. They’re going to build a new wing on it. What this
means for ninth-grade students is they’re going to have more electives. They’ll have driver’s ed; they’ll have band. They’ll have I forget how many foreign languages. Right now they got like one foreign language, no driver’s ed. They’re limited. So kids might want to stay in school longer. Our dropout rate’s about 20 percent; sounds terrible. Some of the neighboring districts—and we’re the second lowest on the Coast. Ocean Springs has got the lowest. I don’t know what theirs is, but ours is about 20 percent. Some of them have between 50 and 52 percent dropout rate. That means if you got two kids that go into ninth grade, one of them’s not going to graduate. But they’re looking to move—when they move the ninth grade, which they’re going to do in 2010, to the high school, then they’re going to move the sixth grade to like the middle school so they have grades six, seven, and eight. I think they’ll have sixth grade on their own. Then it’s going to open the door for them to be able to provide, for the first time ever, pre-K classes throughout the Biloxi school district. Pre-K is essentially like daycare for parents, and it puts them in a classroom environment. So it’s going to open up some new opportunities for them. Their enrollment prior to the storm was about sixty-one hundred students district-wide, K through twelve. Today it’s about 18 percent off; I think it’s about forty-seven hundred. See, a lot of the military families had to move away because they lost their housing.

Smith: So they believe they’ll, within the next year, gain that back so their number of teacher units that the state pays for—

Creel: I haven’t heard anything about them losing. Now, the state, Biloxi—

Smith: They’re 18 percent down. The state’s been letting them go, but there’s—

Creel: Right. Now, by the way, another thing that I don’t think’s totally fair, but I mean, we’re outnumbered, so what can we do? The state’s been letting these six coastal counties walk on this, but it’s not limited to them. Every school district in the state, they’re letting them all do pre-Katrina. I mean, the ones—I say this; I don’t know it, but I would think the ones that are impacted the most are the ones down here on the Coast. Why let everybody reap the benefits of this nice gesture when we were the ones that were impacted? That’s how I feel, but then on the other hand, when we want help from the rest of the state on possibly having to pay higher insurance rates, we’re going to ask them to do that, and we’re going to hope they do. So I can see a—

Smith: And upstate, some of those districts have had, like Picayune’s had, an expansion in the number of kids they’re dealing with so you’re—

Creel: So there are some inequities there, but you hope it’s going to all work out. I mean, right after the storm, it just seemed like there was a lot of goodwill from the legislators. It just seemed like they were going to do anything they could to help us, but then you start hearing about that phenomenon, Katrina fatigue. “Hey, are y’all back yet?” And then they see these billion dollar gaming revenue figures, and they think everything’s back to normal. Point Cadet’s never going to look the way it did,
never. And it pains me to say that, but I mean, I don’t know what else to say other than that’s the fact of the matter, and it’s going to be for a number of reasons.

**Smith:** Well, we’re getting to the end of my list of questions. Is there anything that we should have talked about that we didn’t talk about?

**Creel:** I think we tried to touch everything. I’m sure there’s probably some stuff I left out, but it’s just been a—I still run into this thing where there was actually a case the other day. I’ve forgot how many months ago this was, but I was coming down Highway 90, and it was at night, and they had finally removed the Broadwater, the goal-shaped façade and the structure that was there, and we hadn’t put streetlights up there yet. I don’t mean traffic signals; I mean streetlights. And I mean it was only like for two or three seconds, but I didn’t realize where I was. I mean, I just did not realize, and that is just so weird, to grow up in this community all your life and always know right where you were, but to have a split second where you don’t know where you are. And then sometimes I think to myself that, “How long are we going to have to deal with this?” And we’re going to have to deal with it forever and ever, I’m sure. It’s always going to be there, but one of the things that we did in a newsletter that we put out to the residents like the day after the storm, and the way we got it to the residents, we’d always used the postal service. But we printed up, I don’t know, four or five thousand of them on the public safety copy machine before it overheated and got testy. But what we told people was that, “We’re undergoing something right now that’s unprecedented, but if you look over our history, this is the same thing that people went through; our ancestors went through this same kind of stuff. They went through it in 1947. And there’s that great thing; they call them the Great War, and then the War to End All Wars. And if we choose to live here, this is going to be stuff that we’re going to have to face. We always will.

**Smith:** Biloxi fishing business was wiped out in the 1890s.

**Creel:** Yeah. So we’re always going to—and that’s what, I guess, we’ll have to do. But I still—and sometimes when I’m driving down that highway, just for some reason it’ll strike me that this really did happen. (laughter) You know? I mean, you think you’re going to—I don’t know. I don’t think I’m going to wake up one day, and it’s all going to be a dream, but it still, it takes a long time to—and then another thing is you hate for people to say—and I do it, too—“Well, it’s down here where so-and-so used to be.” (laughter) Or, “You know where it is; it’s over there where the service station used to be,” or, “It’s where Tullis used to be.” There’s going to come a point in time, and I don’t know when it’s going to be, but hopefully that will not be in our vernacular anymore. But it’s going to be a long time coming, and it’s like I told you at the very beginning; I’m hoping that there’s going to be a point in time when I can sit down and discuss this with somebody to where I won’t be emotional about it, on one hand, and then on the other hand, I’m hoping that it always stays with me so that I will always remember it. And we were saying some stuff right before the storm that I felt such personal pride in it, and I know that’s one of the deadly sins. But the governor said in his special address to the legislature some time after Katrina, he said that he
wanted future generations to look back on this time when we made the right decisions, and we did the right thing. And I heard that, and I said, “Wow.” And I went back and looked at something that we said in 1999, (laughter) and I got it hanging on my wall, where Mayor Holloway said that whenever we’re seeing this Beau Rivage open that year and all these other things, yet we were still considering our historic parts of the city and doing historic preservation and affordable housing and doing streets and drainage and lowering taxes and free recreation that we wanted future generations to look back on this time to see where we made smart decisions and we made the right decisions and that they’ll have the same Biloxi, or they will love this city as much as we love it today. And it’ll have some of the same characteristics and some of the same facets and appeal for them that it has for us. And it was an endorsement. Like I said, it was an ego-inflating thing, but to think that he was saying the same things about our recovery that we were saying about what we call our Renaissance during that time. And that was something that just made me feel just so good to know that as smart of a man as he is, to have done all the things he’s done in his career, and just the remarkable leadership that he showed after this, to think that he is saying today the same things that we were saying back then. Not only that, we were doing it, and that was something that I just took immense pride in, immense pride. And our story is not a story of what we’re doing here at city hall. It’s these people that are out there every day. The Bobby Mahones(?) of the world that painted on the side of his thing, “We will be back.” And then he changed it to, “We are back.” (laughter) That kind of stuff is what has just been so great, just to see that, and then just to see how my mayor has dealt with all the things that he’s dealt with. I mean, I just—people look at him, and he’s a man of few words. I said that earlier. And some people—I think one of the things that works in his favor is people underestimate him. They’ll mistakenly think he’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and that works to his advantage because I mean, he is one shrewd individual.

Smith: That’s A.J. Holloway?

Creel: Yeah. I don’t agree with everything he’s done, but then again, it ain’t my place whether I agree. Technically I live in Gulfport, and my job is to explain what he’s thinking, and why he’s thinking it. And a lot of times he plays things close to the vest, and I told him one time. I said, “You know, some people out there say you treat this money like it’s yours, and it’s supposed to be here for the public good.” And he said, “Well, I’m a taxpayer just like everybody else.” And one time I told him, I said, “It looks to me like back in the two or three administrations ago, it looks to me like money was no problem, and they were doing the Seafood Museum and the schooners and the town green, and the natatorium. This is when the economy is going down the tubes.” I said, “It looks to me like money was not a problem back then.” He said, “No. Spending was not a problem back then.” (laughter) But he’s always been that way. And I’ll tell you this; it apparently has served him well, to be the longest-serving mayor in the history of the City, and I think from a personal and egotistical standpoint, I think I’m a part of something really great that’s happening here right now. And I told a reporter—I’d won some awards for public relations work in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—and it really, as big as my ego is, that all I had to do is get out of
the way and let the story tell itself because it’s a great story. How compelling and what we were doing before the storm, and then how we dealt with the storm, and then what our opportunity is today, that we never realized it. And it’s like I told the reporter, I said that I think that God gave me these talents just like he gave everybody in the city these talents, and he put you in a position, whether you realize it or not, that you’re there for a reason. And it’s just made me immensely proud of how the whole city has done. And nothing’s been perfect, but I mean, we’re still getting through it. And I’m so proud of the way that the whole state—the governor said it right. The governor said that this is going to give the rest of the country an opportunity to look. And I think Homeland Security, Donald Chertoff told him, told the governor, he said, “I don’t know if you’ve thought about this or not,” he said, “but this is something that is remarkable that you’re now in a position, the State of Mississippi is in a position where the rest of the country that always thinks *Mississippi Burning* and rebel flags and bare feet,”—that’s what the thing’s been on us for years and years. The way we handle ourselves in this recovery and the way we treat our neighbors, the way we treat these volunteers and the impressions they have of us, this gives us an opportunity where the whole country is going to take another look at us. They’re going to reevaluate us based on what they see in this recovery. And that’s a remarkable opportunity, and it’s one that I hope we don’t squander. But in a democracy, you’re going to have differences of opinion. And that’s part of the thing that makes it great. And that’s all I got to say. I’m sorry for being on a soap box, but from a personal standpoint, those are some of the things that I’ve found to be really remarkable about this, just the opportunities that we have. It ain’t going to be easy getting there. But I’ve talked your ear off.

Smith: Well, thanks a lot. Appreciate it.

(End of interview)