

The Honorable Terry Downey
Mayor of the City of Bayou La Batre, Alabama

Dear Mayor Downey,

October 13, 2020

We are following up on our phone call the other day to your office at City Hall regarding our request that Barbara Robbins be allowed to place a trailer on her property in Snows Quarter, at 8550 East Alba, where she and her 95 year old mother Gertrude have lived since 1968. Since drafting this letter, we learned that her mother passed last week.

We are presently assisting the Robbins family with an application for loan and grant assistance from USDA Rural Development to help repair, or if necessary, rebuild her Katrina damaged home.

The Robbins family never received government rebuilding assistance since Hurricane Katrina, fifteen years ago. Their Homeowners insurance, American General completely rejected the Robbins claim with the excuse that the damage was caused only by water -- despite the fact that it was Hurricane Katrina's high winds that drove the surge of Gulf water through their home and then sucked out all of their furniture on its return to the Gulf. The Robbins family lived for 17 months in a FEMA camper on their property. The Mennonite volunteers replaced the sheetrock. But the Robbins received no assistance for the floors and twice used their own funds to try to repair them. This is what their home looks like today as the floors separate from the walls.



We feel confident that they will have a repaired or rebuilt home within 2 and ½ years, and Ms. Robbins could then sell the trailer and have it moved from the property. We are allowing sufficient time for the application, processing, construction, and final approval by the government agency involved in this housing program.

We would also like to speak with you regarding possible proposals to resolve the present crisis at Safe Harbor Homes and to restore it to the initial promise of “**affordable housing**”, per the agreements between the City of Bayou La Batre and FEMA and HUD who provided all of the \$18 million to purchase the land and build 99 homes for homeless Katrina victims. (See FEMA and HUD sponsored celebratory video “Bayou La Batre Project”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8gKv2s9mQE>). And the “**rent-to-buy**” promise that the City of Bayou La Batre made to Safe Harbor residents.

You probably know that we worked for years to restore these promises with an organizing committee of Safe Harbor residents who wanted to create a democratic housing cooperative. We have linked [the residents' proposed business plan of 2012](#), researched by CPA and Housing Cooperative Organizer Andrew Danforth in conjunction with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives at their Rural Training and Research Center, near Epes, Alabama.

The business plan was discussed, as a solution, during a 2013 court ordered mediation attempting to settle the rent-gouging lawsuit that residents had brought against the City and the Housing Authority by Mobile Legal Services. The mediator was impressed with the plan. And Mr. Danforth complied in good faith to the City's demand that he produce the unblemished financial records of the many successful housing cooperatives, especially involving trailers and manufactured homes similar to those at Safe Harbor, he had organized for many years without one failure ! Mr. Danforth also made a special trip from Massachusetts to give a presentation before the City Council of Bayou La Batre about the housing cooperative proposal.

Mr. Danforth was preceded at the podium by a Safe Harbor resident who denounced the rent hikes and retaliatory threats by the housing authority. She and her 4-year old son were soon evicted after her talk. Her son is pictured in the children's' demonstration against their evictions at a July 2013 City Council meeting. [SOS Rallies in Support of Displaced Bayou La Batre Mothers at Safe Harbor](#). The photograph of the children was taken by Barbara Robbins.

In addition, in November 2014, our efforts were summed up in the [letter to the Mayor of Bayou La Batre and the Housing Authority from Save Our Selves](#), a 60-member coalition of Alabama social justice organizations. This letter was hand-delivered by SOS members and national leaders of the Poor Peoples' Campaign. The letter includes links to several [presentations given to the City Council of Bayou La Batre by our members from all over the state and by Barbara Robbins](#).

Bernard Simelton, president of [the NAACP of the State of Alabama](#) wrote a similar letter co-signed by Barbara Robbins that he helped hand-deliver with the same above-mentioned

group that day to the mayor and Safe Harbor Housing Authority. See: kairoscenter.org/truth-commission-bayou-la-batre-alabama/

President Simelton asked Barbara Robbins to co-sign this letter. His request was a testament to Ms. Robbins selfless activism for some ten years getting folks' homes in the Bayou communities repaired and rebuilt, even as the Robbins suffered without rebuilding. See for example this [article published in the award-winning Bridge the Gulf blog](#) : that shows Barbara and Gertrude Robbins on the 4th Anniversary of Katrina standing in front of one of the 301 homes built in Mobile County with Community Development Block Grants, thanks in large part to public pressure by our coalition, that included the leadership of Ms. Robbins.

In sum, Barbara Robbins is the kind of citizen you need in Bayou La Batre as you move forward past the current scandal perpetrated by the former greedy directors at Safe Harbor. And her mother Gertrude's dying wish, to return to the home and property where she and her husband, a seaman, raised six children beginning in 1968, deserves to be fulfilled.

Options for Affordable Housing at Safe Harbor

There are also other alternatives to a housing cooperative that could assure the promise of affordable housing at Safe Harbor, such as a *home-owners association*. Either option would be wholeheartedly supported by the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and we would use our 53 years of experience and contacts to help find support funding.

A second step, would be an assessment of the condition of the housing units in Safe Harbor and a determination of funds needed to restore and improve all units to their original condition at the inception of the project. The Housing Authority in cooperation with the cooperative or home owners association would seek the financing from HUD and commercial sources to rehabilitate the housing.

A major source of resources for refurbishing and operating the project will of course come from termination of the obscene salaries of nearly \$200,000 given to the two former directors, replaced with a reasonably salaried director. The director could even be elected as in a labor union, by and from the ranks of the residents, with whatever time limits they may decide, and provided with certified training provided by the cooperative or association.

With respect to a home-owners association, it will be an intermediary step toward a cooperative, where those homeowners who wished to buy their unit could begin a 'rent-to-own' payment program, while other remaining occupants continue to pay rent to the Housing Authority. When the majority of the units are owned by the Home Owners Association, the entire property could be converted to a cooperative. The cooperative could also utilize some of the remaining vacant land at Safe Harbor to construct additional units to add resident-members to the project.

We look forward to meeting with you at a mutually convenient time in the near future to discuss the permission for Barbara Robbins to place a trailer at her historic residence in

Snow's Quarter and our ideas for a cooperative to allow the Safe Harbor community to return to and achieve its original purpose.

Cooperatively yours:

Barbara Robbins

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