

No "GO Zone"

By: Nathan Crace Date: Jan. 24, 2006

You may not be aware of it, but Congress's recent legislatively-created "Gulf Opportunity Zone" (also known as the GO Zone) has a strange exclusion that specifically targets golf courses. The monetary assistance afforded by the legislation through low interest loans, tax incentives, etc. excludes businesses in the GO Zone such as bars, strip clubs, massage parlors, and the like. It also excludes golf courses...that's right, golf courses have been lumped in with what most would consider less-than-wholesome forms of business—though their owners and their families have to eat too.

When I received an email from the National Golf Course Owners' Association (NGCOA) when the bill was still being hammered out on Capitol Hill that explained that this exclusion was in the proposed legislation, I sent an email to my Senators and US Representative. In the end, my correspondence and others like it from the golf industry proved too little too late and many existing golf courses struggling to recover and potential new developments looking to invest have been dealt a blow by 565 individuals deeply entrenched inside the Beltway in Washington, D.C.—the vast majority of who will never see first hand the devastation that so many people from the panhandle of Florida and coastal Alabama to Mississippi and Louisiana have had to live through and beyond since Katrina and Rita roared ashore. The following is an excerpt from that email:

'Some 15+ years ago, I came to Mississippi from Indiana to attend Mississippi State University and fell in love with the land, the history, the atmosphere, and the genuine kindness afforded me by the people of this state. I met my wife while in college and elected to stay in the Magnolia State. Now, as a small business in the Mississippi golf industry, I am asking that you help to right the "discrimination" currently in the...Katrina relief bill. I do not believe in throwing the word discrimination around lightly; however, excluding golf courses from any type of relief afforded in the bill simply because they are golf courses is a financially discriminatory act with no sound foundation in common sense, truth, or monetary feasibility...Obviously, decades-old stereotypes are to blame.

For too long, golf courses have been skewed in the general public's eye to be both "anti-environment" and "exclusionary." While this may have been true to some extent some 30 years ago, much has changed in the golf industry of today—even in Mississippi. As a golf course architect, one of my main priorities on every project is environmental sensitivity balanced with the need for growth and development. Creating a living and dynamic entity that not only provides beauty and numerous environmental benefits to its community, but also good-paying jobs and tax revenues for cities, counties, and the states they serve. As golf course operators...we strive to provide an affordable recreational opportunity to seniors, juniors, women, and beginning golfers—including the Mary Ann Edge Junior Girls Golf School of Mississippi [based at The Refuge in Flowood, Mississippi], which helps introduce girls to the game they can play for a lifetime.

If the golf courses on the Gulf Coast that were devastated by Hurricane Katrina are excluded from the federal relief package, a significant contribution to the region's (and the State's) tax base and tourism revenue will be lost—potentially forever. This does not even begin to address the issue of the thousand or so people who would potentially be put out of a job and the millions of dollars in lost revenue to local and area hotels, restaurants, and other businesses who bring in a significant portion of their revenues from visiting golfers—especially during the annual "Snowbird" season when tens of thousands of rounds of golf are played by visiting golfers from the Northern United States and Canada.

The golf industry on the Gulf Coast is a significant member of that region's economy—far too significant to be ignored. They neither need nor want a "handout," but tax incentives and special redevelopment zones are a huge benefit to those working to rebuild and those looking to invest in a new region of the country. Since Katrina, we have been contacted by investors considering investing in new residential developments centered around golf courses on the Coast. Excluding golf courses from the relief package would potentially scare them off from investing in our coastal counties—especially after becoming interested in the region for development after the President's stirring speech from Jackson Square in New Orleans in October.

In the wake of the hurricanes, we have picked ourselves up, dusted ourselves off, and began working to rebuild—knowing that others would come to help in time. Please do not let the thousands of people in the golf industry on the Gulf Coast from Alabama to Mississippi to Louisiana be cast aside because of the ill-conceived perception that Congress "does not need the help the golf industry because golf courses have tons of money." Help us to help ourselves and give the golf industry the same opportunity to help rebuild and revitalize the Gulf region that Congress will afford other legitimate businesses. Golf courses are operated by people too—and those people have families to feed and mortgages to pay just like the thousands of other hard working business owners and employees throughout the affected region. And some have mortgages to pay on the slabs where their homes once stood.'

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2006.