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Questions linger over cost of moving island residents

By [Jacob Batte](#)

Senior Staff Writer

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How much does it cost to move a populated island?

That's the question state officials and the inhabitants of Isle de Jean Charles are trying to answer.

In January, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced Louisiana will receive \$92 million as part of a nationwide disaster resiliency competition.



Abby Tabor/Staff

The Rev. Roch Naquin speaks in his Isle de Jean Charles home about relocating.

Of Louisiana's portion, \$48 million will be spent relocating the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians, while another \$40 million will be used to create the Louisiana Strategic Adaptations for Future Environments Program, or LA SAFE. The remaining \$4 million will remain with the state to cover administrative costs.

Tribal Chief Albert "White Buffalo" Naquin has been trying to move the island's inhabitants for more than a decade. Only 320 acres are left of an island that officials estimate was more than 22,000 acres 60 years ago. Experts suspect the island will be completely submerged within 50 years.

Officials say the new community, still under design, will include homes for residents of the island, a community center, a park and spaces for businesses. An emphasis is being placed on sustainability. The homes will have means for alternative energy, like solar panels, and the surrounding environment is meant to replicate the island during its heyday.

So grant money will be needed to buy the property, develop the land, build the homes and facilities, assist the families on the island in moving and replace any damaged wetlands.

Whether the \$48 million allocated to the project is enough is unclear. Pat Forbes, executive director of the Louisiana Office of Community Development-Disaster Recovery Unit, said the state is working on contingency plans in case the projects cost more - or less - than expected.

"Whether that winds up being the number, we don't know," Forbes said. "There are several ways that can go. Maybe it costs more money, maybe it costs less."

“One of our focuses is on doing it as economically as possible,” Forbes added.

The timeline to spend the money is a short one. The money must be tied to a project by September 2017 and construction has to be finished by September 2022.

No location has been finalized. A sign proclaiming “HUD Housing Coming Soon” near property in Schriever along La. 24, which was used as an example in the application, is a fake, state and local officials said.

The Lowlander Center, a nonprofit based in Gray that advocates for coastal communities, partnered with the tribe to create their application. Naquin said the group took the lead on writing the application.

Lowlander facilitator Kristina Peterson said the center determined the cost estimate after talking with relocation experts and consulting on HUD and EPA best practices. From there the state reviewed the number and then submitted the application.

“We were able to get experts on water, on energy, to say this is what we think the best thing is going to be and this is how much it’s going to cost,” said Richard Krajeski, a board member for the nonprofit.

The \$48 million doesn’t go straight from the federal government into the community’s hands. Instead, the community will identify contractors and other expenditures. Then, they’ll submit those to the state, which will then issue the money to pay for the work.

The Lowlander Group has raised nearly \$1 million in additional cash and in-kind promises to assist in the community’s development beyond just the relocation the island residents.

Officials say the benefit goes beyond just the tribe.

“We’ve got a second objective of creating a model and lessons learned for this process for other communities to use around the country when they’re facing the same sorts of challenges,” Forbes said. “In order for a model to be viable and replicable, it’s got to be affordable.”

Peterson added, “What the country and the world is going to gain is something that’s exemplar and the whole world can benefit from.”

Senior Staff Writer Jacob Batte can be reached at 448-7635 or jacob.batte@dailycomet.com. Follow him on Twitter @ja_batte.

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