Katrina cottages gain cachet across country while hurricane victims wait

People outside of Gulf region express interest

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WASHINGTON — The pretty, Southern-style “Katrina cottages” designed to house hurricane victims may go up in places all over the country long after they’re a presence on the storm-damaged Gulf Coast.

Bureaucratic delays and a spat between Mississippi and Louisiana have stalled release of federal money the two states need to move Hurricane Katrina victims into the cottages and other permanent homes.

Meanwhile, people outside the Gulf Coast have expressed interest in using the cottages for everything from vacation homes to ski lodges to military housing, according to Ray Taylor, whose California-based company, Housing International, makes the homes.

That means families living hundreds of miles from the Gulf Coast and New Orleans may move into the storm-proof cottages months before most Katrina victims do.

Just outside Washington in Montgomery County, Md., a steel-framed Katrina cottage built to withstand 140 mile-per-hour winds is on display in a parking lot. It’s about to be the new home of Phyllis Johnson, 59, whose dilapidated house nearby will be torn down and replaced by the cottage.

Johnson, disabled by health problems, will move into the cottage with her daughter, thanks to a Montgomery County housing program that helps low-income homeowners. Taylor’s company donated the cottage.

The cottage’s unique architectural style will stand out in Johnson’s suburban neighborhood, but she doesn’t mind. She is especially pleased with its wrap-around porch, large windows and nine-foot ceiling, which gives her new home an airy feel.

“It is different, but I like it a lot,” Johnson said.

Taylor said the Katrina cottage’s tough, steel construction can protect against earthquakes in California as well as hurricanes in the Gulf Coast. Local governments also are interested in the houses as part of urban renewal plans, he said.

Taylor has built a new factory in Reserve, La., to manufacture the cottages in an assembly line process. He hopes to build 5,000 homes a year.

Marianne Cusato, a New York architect who created one of the first Katrina cottages, has teamed up with Lowe’s Home Improvement to distribute them nationwide. She said she’s received more than 10,000 e-mails from people who want to know more about the tiny homes.

Cusato said the widespread popularity of the cottages will help Katrina’s victims, even though they’re out of reach for most displaced coastal residents.

“The more successful overall we are, the more resources we can put into the coast,” she said.

The first Katrina cottage was created about a year ago as an alternative to the cramped Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers that house thousands of families in Mississippi and Louisiana.

Designs for the cottages include wide, columned porches and other Southern architectural touches. Urban planners involved in reconstructing Katrina-devastated areas championed the cottages as building blocks for “New Urbanist” neighborhoods that convey a small-town feel.

Delays in moving Louisiana and Mississippi residents into Katrina cottages are partly due to fierce competition between those states and others for a $400 million pilot program that would replace government storm trailers.

FEMA is expected to announce winning proposals next week. But it will take months before any money is released because environmental impact studies must be conducted and dozens of federal regulations must be met.

Cusato said many Katrina victims will decide to buy the cottages themselves instead of waiting for federal help.

“If the government can’t do it, it can be done through private enterprise,” Cusato said.

Jennifer Wilson, a spokeswoman at Lowe’s, said Katrina cottage kits will be available in the company’s Mississippi and Louisiana stores by mid-December. She estimates prices will range from the high $20,000’s to around $50,000.

Cottages will be available in all of Lowe’s 1,300 stores next year, Wilson said. She expects them to be used as hunting lodges, cabins and low-income housing.

Wilson also said the Katrina cottage could end up replacing barracks at military bases.

Unlike Taylor’s factory-built cottages, Lowe’s cottages come in kits that include all materials needed to build a home from the foundation up, including studs, wall panels, insulation, fixtures, electrical systems, plumbing and appliances, Wilson said.

She said Lowe’s is ready to gear up production of the kits.

“It’s full speed ahead,” Wilson said.

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On the Web

- Cusato Cottages: www.cusatocottages.com