Hurricane Katrina left St. Bernard Parish a ruin. Nowhere else did the monster storm leave so few seeds of hope, so little foundation to build on.

The floodwaters took just hours to inundate the entire parish, swallowing up subdivisions and sweeping two-story homes off their foundations. Nearly every home and business marinated in the fetid seawater for weeks. Almost every one of St. Bernard's 68,000 residents was left homeless.

A leak at Murphy Oil's refinery in Meraux spilled a million gallons of crude into the surrounding neighborhood, polluting canals and mixing a layer of thick muck into the topsoil. The stench from a stew of oil and sewage was overpowering. The parish eventually had to demolish more than 8,300 homes.

There were psychic scars in addition to the physical ones. The flooding killed 127 people in St. Bernard, more than a quarter of them elderly residents who drowned as waters.
rose at St. Rita’s nursing home near Poydras.

Many families across the tightly knit parish on the Gulf of Mexico’s doorstep can trace their roots back long before 1965’s Hurricane Betsy, the last storm to bring St. Bernard to its knees. Katrina was far worse.

This time, no one was spared, owing doubts as to whether the parish would revive at all.

“The unique challenge for us was: How do we keep our residents engaged and not making alternate plans to depart from St. Bernard?” said Craig Taffaro, a Parish Council member during Katrina who later served as parish president.

Almost a decade after the storm, much of the parish has been rebuilt and many of its residents have returned, though not all. As of last year, St. Bernard’s population was up to about 44,000—a third less than before the storm struck.

Of 15 public schools, many of which were damaged beyond repair, 11 have been rebuilt. St. Bernard’s water system includes 23 miles of defensive structures along St. Bernard’s edge, part of $14.5 billion spent on flood protection for the New Orleans region.

Home prices rebounded. On average, undamaged properties in St. Bernard fetched $77 per square foot last year, the same as before Katrina.

The parish also has become more diverse, with the proportion of nonwhite residents more than doubling from 12 percent in 2000 to 26 percent in 2019.

As in New Orleans, there were questions not only about how long it would take St. Bernard to recover but also about how the local government should shape that recovery.

The scope of the devastation was so massive, so thorough, that it spurred calls to rebuild more thoughtfully, in ways that avoided past mistakes.

In St. Bernard, as in the city, there was a difficult—perhaps a racially divisive—public discussion about “shrinking the footprint” by trying to buy out homeowners in lower-lying areas and encouraging them to cluster on higher ground.

“We needed to look at where we were, where we thought we could’ve been at the time and drive to do better,” parish historian Bill Hyland said. “It would always be a disaster, at least the aftermath could be better.”

The Parish Council put together a committee to draw up a framework for St. Bernard’s recovery. Members proposed various improvements, like integrating public streets with a system of canals, establishing a government center and encouraging more retail and office space along Judge Perez Drive.

Other ideas included redeveloping Old Arabi with a riverfront plaza and park and building a new complex along St. Bernard Highway in Chalmette that would bring together the parish government and the courthouse.

Addressing the footprint dilemma, the committee pushed to create a so-called “mitigation zone” along the lowest edge of land adjacent to the 40 Arpent Canal, which overtopped during the storm, and to restrict rebuilding in neighborhoods close to Lake Borgne.

The hope was that a smaller footprint would cut the cost of providing public services and prevent the dreaded “jack-o’-lantern” effect in spots where few homes were rebuilt.

There also was racial controversy over housing policies. In the wake of Katrina, St. Bernard officials instituted a “blood relative” ordinance that required a parish permit in order for a homeowner to rent a single-family residence to anyone who was not a relative. Court battles over that measure eventually led to more than $2 million in settlements against the parish.

In 2012, the U.S. Justice Department got involved, suing St. Bernard over allegations that for years the parish had violated the Fair Housing Act by attempting to limit rental opportunities for low-income and black residents. A year later, the parish settled that lawsuit for $2.5 million.

Part of the new levee built after Hurricane Katrina that begins at the Mississippi River in Braithwaite

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Missed opportunities.

Much as in the city, some of St. Bernard’s more ambitious visions were never realized, in part because they would have cost too much.

Walter Leger Jr., a lawyer who co-chaired the Citizens Recovery Committee, wanted to redevelop St. Bernard’s higher property taxes, he said, is that a smaller population is paying for public services that have to be stretched over more or less the same area.

“It costs more in many cases to provide services when you don’t have people living in an area than when you do, because you’ve got to maintain the system,” Peralta said.

The overall property tax rate is up more than a third from before the storm—typical of a $130,000 home with a homestead exemption pays about $230 more per year. Voters signaled their displeasure last year by rejecting almost $10 million a year in property taxes—nearly all renewals—to pay for public services such as fire protection, garbage, recreation, roads and, perhaps most crucially for such a vulnerable parish, levee maintenance.

There’s just not enough retail,” she said. “There’s not enough grocery stores. They just need to have some more things for people to do.”

Gorbaty, the former state 4th Circuit Court of Appeal judge, believes the parish is halfway to making a full recovery.

“Finally, home values are coming back up,” Gorbaty said. “We’re starting to see construction again. Builders are interested. I think you’re going to start seeing it, but I’m not going to be surprised if it’s that 26-year process we talked about after the storm.”

FEB. 19, 2006: A float rolls down Judge Perez Highway past a pile of debris during the Knights of Nemesia Mardi Gras parade in Chalmette. The parade rolled through one of the areas of St. Bernard Parish that was heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

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