

RLJ Companies to Bring Jobs, Build Homes in Haiti

Posted By Marcia Wade Talbert on April 13, 2010 @ 5:11 pm



Robert L. Johnson

The **RLJ Companies** announced Monday that it will team up with manufacturing company **Global Building Solutions** to develop quick and cost-effective mass housing in Haiti following the country's January earthquake.

The venture, which will be known as Caribbean Opportunity Holdings, is planning to build a structured insulated panel (SIP) manufacturing facility in the area near Cap-Haitien, Haiti's second-largest city.

"We know that putting a manufacturing facility in-country as opposed to shipping all of the materials...from outside will create more jobs and make it cheaper to make the houses," said Lisa Pickrum, chief operating officer of RLJ Companies, which was founded by Robert L. Johnson. "We have found that sustainable projects that help people in the long term... only come about and are maintained when you move beyond aid into profit sharing businesses."

Johnson also launched RLJ Development L.L.C. (**No. 8 on the BE Industrial/Service list with \$605.2 million in revenue**) and is the creator of Black Entertainment Television.

Most buildings in Haiti are made of concrete blocks, which tend to crumble in hurricane or earthquake conditions. The SIP technology is uniquely applicable to Haiti because it is waterproof, humidity resistant, resistant to earthquakes up to magnitude 7.0, and lightweight.

Caribbean Opportunity Holdings will produce the pre-engineered and exportable building materials in **Cap-Haitien**, about 130 miles north of Port-au Prince, where the magnitude 7.0 earthquake killed an estimated 230,000 people in January and left 1.3 million survivors homeless and living in tent camps.

"We chose [Cap-Haitien] as a place that would be able to sustain some job creation and tourism," says Pickrum. Scores of displaced people are moving to Cap-Haitien, putting a lot of economic strain on the province.

The project will also serve Port-au-Prince since the building materials created at the plant can be shipped by barge or truck to help build infrastructure across all of Haiti.

Pickrum declined to give the cost of the facility, but estimated that it would be a multimillion dollar budget that would create 150 to 300 jobs in that location. COH will profit by selling construction and building materials to nonprofit organizations and donors. Although, the return will not be large initially, Pickrum says the increased infrastructure will pave the way for longer term tourism developments like hotels.

The two companies have a track record of constructing projects where infrastructure is scarce. GBS partnered with RLJ Companies in 2008 to build a four-star luxury resort and spa in Monrovia, Liberia, in less than 12 months. The **RLJ Kendeja Resort & Villas**, a 78-room villa style hotel, which opened March 2009, was the first hotel construction completed in Liberia in twenty-five years.

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