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Alliance planning homes for Haiti

Businessman and Black Entertainment Television founder Robert L. "Bob" Johnson is behind the latest push to rebuild Haiti.

On Tuesday, Johnson said his Maryland-based RLJ Companies are joining forces with Global Building Solutions, cruise giant Royal Caribbean and Haiti-based WIN Group to build two factories in Haiti that could churn out about 800 homes per month.

Johnson made the announcement after returning from a trip to the earthquake-shattered island where he met with President René Prével and Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive.

Once the new group gets the go-ahead from the Haiti Reconstruction Commission, the factories could be in operation in six to seven months, he said.

The group will be using a technology called structured insulated panels, or SIPs, to build lightweight, earthquake-resistant structures. A two-bedroom, two-bathroom house using the technology could be built for under \$10,000, he said. It's unclear how much Haitians will have to pay for the homes.

The alliance brings together deep pockets, one of Haiti's most politically connected families -- the Mevs, who own the WIN Group -- and Royal Caribbean, which has been operating in Haiti for almost three decades.

"You put [us] all together and it's a very dynamic, powerful group of companies," Johnson said. "We know what we are doing, and we have the commitment of the prime minister and the president to become an important part of the revitalization process."

The news comes amid growing dismay with Haiti's recovery effort.

Five months after a 7.0-magnitude earthquake leveled much of the capital and killed -- by government estimates -- some 300,000 people, much of the heavy lifting remains to be done.

Some contractors who swarmed the island in the days after the earthquake hoping for quick contracts have quietly begun moving personnel back to the United States as they prepare for hurricane season and vie for oil-cleanup work in the Gulf.

J.R. Bergeron of Bergeron Emergency Services in Broward County said they are still hoping to get reconstruction contracts in Haiti but have been disappointed by the slow pace. "We're kind of on hold," said Bergeron, whose staff remains in Haiti.

The only contract that has come up lately is a project to build a bridge worth less than a half-million dollars.

"We wouldn't even fly over there for that," he said.

The Johnson group isn't alone in trying to bring innovative building techniques to the island. Miami-based Innovida, which makes structures out of fiber-composite boards, also has plans to build a factory in Haiti.

Innovida founder Claudio Osorio says the company already has contracts from the private sector and nongovernmental organizations to build homes and offices worth \$25 million to \$50 million.

Despite their success, challenges remain, Osorio said.

“The difficulties remain the same: The flow of funds into the country and the flow from NGOs -- it's all very slow,” he said.

Johnson's group isn't waiting for government contracts. Royal Caribbean will be using the technology to build a school in the port town of Labadee along Haiti's northern coast. The town, a port of call for Royal Caribbean, is seen as critical to rebuilding the nation as a tourist destination. One of the new factories will be built along the northern coast -- likely close to Labadee and Haiti's second-largest city, Cap-Haitien, Johnson said.

RLJ has a track record of working in challenging environments. The company first teamed up with Global Building Solutions to build a 79-room hotel in civil-war-torn Liberia.

Johnson, who became the first African-American billionaire when he sold BET to Viacom for \$3 billion in 2001, no longer appears on Forbes' list of the 400 wealthiest Americans. But he still has the ear of the rich and powerful in Washington, D.C.

Johnson said he plans to use those connections to advocate for the struggling nation. “I told the [Haitian] president that we are not just going to come here and help out on infrastructure,” he said. “I am going to be a voice for Haiti.”

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