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### Blanco defends record on Louisiana's recovery

Criticized after hurricanes, she may face tough re-election

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By MELINDA DESLATTE Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. – Looking ahead to a tough campaign for re-election, Gov. Kathleen Blanco said Friday she has a strong "report card" to show voters and will continue to press the same priorities in 2007: business attraction, education improvement and hurricane recovery.

"I am Louisiana's hardest-working governor. I have been met with the biggest challenges," Ms. Blanco said in an interview with reporters at the Governor's Mansion to talk about the highs and lows of 2006 and her plans for next year, when she faces what is expected to be a difficult re-election bid.

Opinion polls have shown Ms. Blanco's support in a slump since hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated much of south Louisiana last year and state officials were criticized for a slow and weak response.

The criticism continued into 2006. Ms. Blanco, her staff and her Louisiana Recovery Authority have been the target of complaints about red tape in recovery aid for local government repairs and the slow pace of assistance and dollars for homeowners and small businesses. The governor's proposals to spend \$2 billion in new state money in a quick pre-holiday special legislative session were lambasted around the state, and the session was called a failure.

"This session was a waste of taxpayer dollars, however abundant they may seem to be right now," the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana said in its summation of Ms. Blanco's legislative efforts.

But on Friday, Ms. Blanco didn't list the session as one of her biggest disappointments for the year. She defended her record, saying she spent 2006 laying strong foundations for gains in economic development, education, coastal protection and hurricane recovery.

"I didn't get everything I wanted – I want to be clear about that – but I've laid the groundwork for the future," she said.

The scrutiny of Ms. Blanco's successes and failures is expected to intensify in the new year, and with the start in earnest of gubernatorial campaigns for the fall elections.

U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, who lost his bid for governor to Ms. Blanco in 2003, appears to be gearing up for a renewed effort to get the job, and a slew of other candidates are eyeing it. Though Mr. Jindal, a Republican from Kenner, said he won't make an announcement on whether he will run until next month, he's reactivated his state campaign account and is seeking to beef up his war chest.

Ms. Blanco said Louisiana brought in \$6 billion in new business investment and 7,000 new permanent jobs since the hurricanes, with planned chemical plant expansions in the River Parishes, a new film production studio planned in New Orleans and other job announcements.

The Democratic governor acknowledged her disappointment in the speed of the housing aid program developed by her staff and tied to her name, the "Road Home" program. The Blanco administration hired the private contractor running the program, and Ms. Blanco said she continues to push the company, ICF International Inc., to speed up grant delivery.

ICF said it continues to improve its aid program and understands the urgency of need.

"I think that if we keep pushing that, that we'll see more and more people reaping benefits," Ms. Blanco said.

The governor said her proudest moments this year included helping persuade the White House and Congress to give Louisiana more than \$4 billion in additional hurricane recovery aid and backing the funding that allowed the renovation and repair of the Superdome in New Orleans and the Saints to play their first home game of the season back home.

Among the initiatives she said she would push in 2007 are:

- Pay raises to get public school teachers to the Southern regional average in annual pay, with a price tag of about \$156 million to cover the costs of a \$2,100 raise.
- More aid from Congress for alternative housing for the 75,000 Louisiana residents living in FEMA trailers. Mississippi will get the bulk of federal grant funding set aside for the "Katrina cottages," and Ms. Blanco said she will ask for at least another \$1 billion.
- Legislation to keep existing insurers in Louisiana and attract new ones after the hurricanes created problems finding affordable insurance in much of south Louisiana.
- Universal health care coverage for all children in Louisiana