



La. recovery: Cake walk or endless to-do list for next governor?

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BATON ROUGE, La. -- If Hurricane Katrina was the political albatross that doomed one governor, will the era of post-storm recovery be a gravy train for the next governor?

In the Capitol, opinions are divided.

Judging by last month's legislative session, one could get the impression that the Katrina-fueled gravy train is no illusion. State lawmakers carved up a record \$2 billion surplus, much of it courtesy of the folks in hurricane-hit south Louisiana who've been buying new roofs, replacing flooded cars and fixing smashed boats. Approved: New roads, new research facilities, pay raises, and funds for a plethora of programs run by churches, charities and neighborhood groups.

"This governor won't see the benefit of those projects," said Benny Rousselle, the ex-president of Plaquemines Parish, as he walked the halls of the Capitol. "Who's going to be cutting the ribbons and attending the commemorations?"

Not Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

Dogged by an image of indecisiveness after Katrina, Blanco is stepping down and the race is on for her successor.

But will the next governor enjoy a cake walk? Not quite, analysts say.

"The next governor is going to have to do some very heavy lifting because the problems in Louisiana are structural and long-standing and Katrina and Rita have contributed to that," said Pearson Cross, a political science professor at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

What everyone agrees on is that Katrina and Rita are going to define the job description of the next governor, just as they unexpectedly interrupted Blanco's crusade to become the economic development governor.

"The next governor, at the end of his first term, he will still be doing recovery," said Sam Jones, a Blanco aide who's been heavily involved in rebuilding. "This is going to be a long recovery."

It's an impressive to-do list.

Here are some of the must-dos:

- _ Fix any lingering problems with the Road Home program, which is now facing a multibillion dollar shortfall.
- _ Stop soaring insurance rates from choking off the recovery.

- _ Heal the broken relationship between New Orleans and the Capitol that was caused by a clash between Mayor Ray Nagin and Blanco.
- _ Short-circuit a crime wave in New Orleans.
- _ Build a public school system that works in New Orleans.
- _ Beg Congress and the White House for more money.
- _ Keep north Louisiana, jealous of the attention and money New Orleans has gotten since Katrina, from rising up in revolt.
- _ Soften the blow from an eventual downturn in tax revenues once the Katrina boom peters out.

_ And pray that another hurricane doesn't set the rebuilding clock back to zero. "Believe me it's not going to be a gravy train for the next governor," said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, a Baton Rouge-based government watchdog group.

But in Baton Rouge, there's a feeling that the next governor may be stepping in at just the right moment.

"No one denies that we're bolstered for a while by somewhat of a false economy, or a recovery economy," said Rep. Hollis Downs, R-Ruston.

"But those who argue that it's one-time money, though, I say, 'No, that's not right. It may be three-four-five-times money, and maybe six-seven-eight-times money,'" Hollis said. "We know it will run out at some point, but we know it's got a tail, and probably a fairly long tail."

So, could the perfect storm become the perfect platform for belated change? Maybe. "The challenges are special, but it's really a great opportunity," said Walter Isaacson, the journalist and vice chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

And there's so much crying out for help: Public schools, the state's health care system, the eroding wetlands, the state highway system, the state worker pension system.

A consensus is forming that the recovery is about the economy, not just a massive resurrection of what was destroyed by the hurricanes.

"I don't think anybody would want us to build, build, build houses without building the economy at the same time," said Eugene Schreiber, managing director of the World Trade Center of New Orleans.

"What would the ideal governor be like?" Edward Blakely, the New Orleans recovery director, said.

"It would be someone who really understands the entire state and was interested in moving the state away from being a natural resource state to being a technology-based, human resources-based state," Blakely said.

"That means a bigger emphasis on education. That means a bigger emphasis on transportation, and economic development aimed at brains first," he added.

What kind of governor would that be? Someone who fits the old Louisiana model for the can-do governor, a heavy handed populist like Huey Long and Edwin Edwards?

"I think that's a bit misguided," Blakely said. "Leadership is more important than the leader ... Somebody who can form a team in the state and brings up a whole bunch of leaders; I think (Gov.) Schwarzenegger has done a good job in California."