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## Criticized Levee Boards Survive in Louisiana

By ADAM NOSSITER

BATON ROUGE, La., Nov. 22 - In the crucial battle of a post-hurricane special legislative session that ended Tuesday, Louisiana lawmakers voted down an effort to reshape the state's fragmented levee protection system, which has long been criticized as a bastion of patronage.

The proposal, strongly backed by business interests in New Orleans who hoped to demonstrate the state's seriousness in rebuilding, would have consolidated a host of local boards in charge of maintaining the levees in South Louisiana. Each parish has its own board, providing jobs and perks for the politically well connected who are appointed to it. The head of the Orleans Parish board was recently forced to resign after being caught helping himself to \$91,000 in "back pay."

But the consolidation effort was not backed by Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, who pushed a measure regarded as weaker, and it was soundly defeated in the House on Sunday after passing in the Senate.

Much of the 17-day special session mirrored the usual course of business at the Capitol. Legislators praised cold beer and oysters in New Orleans and the heroics of a local baseball player who had unfortunately slipped away to Ole Miss, and generally expressed sorrow that so convivial a gathering had to end.

But these are not usual times in Louisiana. The state is facing an enormous crisis: a loss of nearly \$1 billion in tax revenue because of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the cost of rebuilding New Orleans and the rest of the coast, all while thousands of residents remain homeless, jobless and stateless. Hopes for the special session had been high.

In the end, the reviews were mixed. There were what many regarded as some clear accomplishments, including the state's takeover of the New Orleans public schools, an effort backed by the governor that split her from her customary allies among black lawmakers. The schools have for several years been a source of concern in Baton Rouge because of their academic, administrative and financial failures. Corruption on the Orleans Parish School Board has been so endemic that the Federal Bureau of Investigation set up a field office at the board's headquarters.

In addition, more than \$600 million was cut from the state's \$18 billion budget over the 17 days, mostly in health care and education. Many of the cuts were made to the Medicaid program, which would have shrunk anyway because so many thousands of Louisianians, particularly the poorer, are no longer in the state. Some small-scale business tax cuts also passed, along with a Christmastime sales-tax holiday.

Governor Blanco, a first-term Democrat, called the session a success. But critics expressed doubt that the lawmakers had done enough to convince outside officials, most crucially those in Washington, that Louisiana was focused on political change and the problems at hand. The perception of irresponsibility has made federal lawmakers reluctant to spend billions rebuilding the New Orleans area.

"It is hard to tell whether what the state has done is enough to send a dramatic message that we're doing what we need to do in the way of recovery," said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonpartisan group here. "This was the key question: how this plays in Washington, how it plays in Houston," where many Louisiana businesses have temporarily set up shop.

One legislator was more blunt. "I'm trying to see what we did," said Senator Donald R. Cravins, a French-speaking Democrat from the Acadian parishes west of Baton Rouge who is sometimes critical of Ms. Blanco. "We missed the boat on a lot of things." The state did little to put thousands of unemployed people back to work, he added.

With New Orleans, the state and the federal government signing numerous demolition and reconstruction contracts, and some public officials profiting handsomely, there were also calls to bar Louisiana officials from post-Katrina windfalls. The proposals failed, and the Legislature instead adopted a disclosure measure, much weaker than an outright ban but backed by Governor Blanco.

Business groups, desperate to send out any signal that the area was being made safe from floods, strongly backed the levee consolidation measure. But parochial animosities - age-old enmities between Orleans Parish and neighboring St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes - prevailed, as did the governor's own backing of a different plan: simply creating a new commission to oversee the existing levee boards.

The levee consolidation "could have been the centerpiece," Mr. Cravins said. Now "business is going to be very reluctant to go back in if they don't have confidence" - a sentiment echoed by New Orleans business leaders serving on Mayor C. Ray Nagin's recovery commission, who reacted to the vote with outrage.

Backslapping and joviality aside, there was ample evidence the legislators were acutely conscious that their actions were taking place on a larger stage.

"We've worked hard in this session," Butch Gautreaux, a South Louisiana Democrat, told his colleagues in the Senate chamber as the session wound down Tuesday afternoon.

"I will be praying that others will see how people in Louisiana are working to help themselves," Mr. Gautreaux said, worrying aloud that President Bush "will let this state down."

The budget cuts are expected to bring thousands of layoffs, and many of those cuts were met by cries of pain.

"Look at these services for what they are," Senator Diana E. Bajoie, a New Orleans Democrat, pleaded with other lawmakers. "We cannot ignore the people who need us most."

But in this session of the Democratic-controlled Legislature, lawmakers agreed, the agenda was substantially driven by Republicans, even if they were not always successful. Angering many of her Democratic allies, Ms. Blanco listened to the counsel of the minority, which since the storms had assumed an activist budget-cutting stance.

With the state still on its knees, though, no one in either party is gloating.

"These are not simple cuts," said Senator Jay Dardenne, a Republican from suburban Baton Rouge. "But they were absolutely necessary, because we don't have the revenue."

Mr. Dardenne nonetheless lamented that a Republican dream here - a wholesale realignment of the state's

bloated government - had been put off.

"What we didn't do is totally rethink the budget," he said. "We didn't do the real challenge, of restructuring Louisiana government."

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