

Lack of levee board reform may make more relief difficult

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"Provided further that none of the \$12,000,000 provided herein for the Louisiana Hurricane Protection Study shall be available for expenditure until the state of Louisiana establishes a single state or quasi-state entity to act as local sponsor for constr

-- Language in the federal supplemental Defense Appropriations Act for the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers passed by Congress in December. U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Metairie, was author of the restricting language.

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BATON ROUGE -- If the Louisiana Legislature adjourns its special session this week without enacting significant levee board reform, the state's congressional delegation said they would find it very difficult to convince Washington to provide more hurricane relief.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-Metairie, said Washington colleagues in both the House and Senate regularly ask him about levee board reform. "People are looking for strong reform and a strong vision for our recovery coming out of Louisiana," he said.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco and state Sen. Walter Boasso, R-Chalmette, placed their one-board reform bill on hold in the state Senate, leaving the issue undebated Monday.

But the House of Representatives approved several levee board bills -- some of them in conflict with others -- Monday afternoon and evening that leave hurricane and flood protection governance fragmented in the New Orleans area and leave St. Bernard Parish out.

Those House-passed bills cannot be considered in a Senate committee until Wednesday, and those bills would have to be approved by the full Senate without changes or face a return trip to the House for a second round of approvals.

The special session must end at 6 p.m. Friday, so the next few days are crucial for levee board reform, which Blanco has said is her No. 1 priority. She adopted it as a priority after a public outcry in the New Orleans area when Boasso's single-board bill, which had passed the Senate easily, died on the House floor.

Boasso said he proposed having two new levee authorities, one in the Lake Pontchartrain-Lake Borgne drainage basin on the East Bank of the Mississippi River and the other on the West Bank, which drains through Barataria Bay to the south. Both would be appointed by the governor from nominations by professional groups, universities and nonprofit government watchdog groups. The current practice limits the governor to appoint from nominations by legislators and other politicians.

Boasso said House members in suburban New Orleans areas would not accept the compromise.

In December, U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Metairie, sponsored language that made \$12 million allocated to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' study of constructing a levee system capable of protecting Louisiana from a Category 5 hurricane conditional on a "a single state or quasi-state entity" in charge of levees in "the greater New Orleans area."

Jindal reaffirmed he meant a single board for the New Orleans region.

"This is more than the \$12 million," Jindal said. "We are asking the rest of the country for billions. They are

expecting us to put aside the politics of old."

The idea is not just a single board, but "also making sure the appointees are made on the basis of qualifications, not political considerations, and making sure levee boards are focused on levees and not on airports, marinas and casinos," Jindal said.

Vitter said there's much at stake if the Louisiana Legislature does not enact levee board reform.

"The main loss is we are not properly serving Louisiana citizens and not bringing the reform we need," Vitter said. "Secondarily, it is not going to help our cause in Washington at all."

U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, said he has had many conversations with U. S. House leaders controlling appropriations and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that is responsible for flood control.

"What I have been told by them is they want to see significant reforms," Boustany said. "Where we are going to have trouble in the future is getting funding for a Category 5 levee system."

U. S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Monroe, echoed the sentiment.

"That's what people up here are looking at," Alexander said. "They see the negative stuff and none of the positive stuff. Not to have levee board reform keeps the hurdles up for us."

Jim Brandt, president of the Louisiana Public Affairs Council, said the Legislature's failure to enact reform "would be a major setback and embarrassment for the state."

"To fail in such a highly visible fashion would have a damaging impact," Brandt said.

He noted that not only is levee board reform in trouble, but reforming and downsizing New Orleans government is apparently dead and the Legislature is "trying to micromanage" the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

"There's a lot to do and not much time to do it," Brandt said.

University of Louisiana-Lafayette political scientist Pearson Cross said his sense is that "voters are looking for action."

While other issues are confusing, levee board reform "resonates with voters," Cross said.

"I don't think it will look good for anybody involved. Not the governor, and not legislators," Cross said.

Levee board reform is "the cornerstone of this legislative session," said Sen. Lydia Jackson, D-Shreveport. "It is the precursor for every aspect of recovery and rebuilding our state because New Orleans is the economic base for the entire state's economy."

Sen. Robert Barham, R-Oak Ridge, said voters expect legislators to behave differently.

"I think the people want us to show that we know we have problems like we've never had before and they expect us to take action," Barham said.

Without that action, Barham said, "voters will be angry."