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Levee board redo coming to a vote

Constitutional amendment requires statewide approval

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By Frank Donze

The government-reform crowd was elated back in February after a recalcitrant Legislature finally agreed to restructure southeast Louisiana's patchwork network of levee boards.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who had made the initiative a top priority, couldn't hide her glee, announcing after the vote that "if consolidation of the New Orleans-area levee boards was the only accomplishment, I would call this session a total success."

Despite Blanco's claim of victory, the battle is not yet won.

Implementing the revolutionary changes requires a constitutional amendment, which voters across the state will consider Saturday.

Proponents of the measure, listed as No. 3 on a 13-item list of proposed amendments, say the New Orleans region's fragmented system of flood control and hurricane protection contributed to the deadly flooding and widespread destruction during Hurricane Katrina.

Beyond issues of safety, they argue, consolidation will send a strong message to the nation - particularly to the Washington decision-makers responsible for financing the recovery effort -- that Louisiana will no longer conduct business as usual.

'About our state's image'

If approved by voters, the amendment would consolidate levee boards in St. Bernard Parish, the east banks of Orleans, Jefferson, St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes, and the southern portions of St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes. A separate board would cover areas on the west bank of the Mississippi River.

The two levee districts would be overseen by 11-member boards that Blanco would appoint. Those boards would be under the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, created by Blanco and the Legislature in November to oversee local levee boards and set state levee priorities.

The legislation calls for the CPRA to "serve as the single state entity to act as local sponsor for construction, operation, and maintenance of hurricane, storm damage reduction, flood control, and coastal restoration."

Under a change that amendment supporters consider critical to erasing Louisiana's reputation as a hotbed of corruption, board appointees now chosen largely through political connections would be replaced by individuals with expertise in accounting, law, engineering, hydrology, geology or other water-related fields.

"This is about our state's image," said state Sen. Walter Boasso, R-Arabi, who authored the levee board legislation and, with Blanco's support, guided the bill on its often-tortuous journey through the legislative process with the help of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, a grassroots organization formed to champion the cause.

"The economy of southeast Louisiana was decimated by the hurricane. And if we don't restore the confidence of business interests and ordinary people that we'll have levee oversight by professionals, we're not going to bring it back," Boasso said. "And that will negatively affect every parish in this state."

'One-man pilgrimage'

For weeks now, Boasso has been on what he calls his "one-man pilgrimage" across Louisiana to drum up support for the amendment. From Acadiana to Monroe, Ruston to Natchitoches, and Shreveport to Lake Charles, Boasso said he has received a mostly positive response from voters.

"They understand now more than ever before," he said. "They get it. They have a sense of the consequences of not passing this."

Proponents of the amendment say their polling indicates there is now enough statewide support to approve the measure, but they declined to provide data to back up that claim.

As the campaign heads into its final week, no organized opposition has surfaced, though Boasso said he has received reports that an underground effort is under way to defeat the measure, featuring bumper stickers that say "Support Your Local Levee Board."

Boasso said part of the anti-consolidation "whisper campaign" is misinformation that current levee district employees would lose their jobs when the changes take effect Jan. 1.

Under the legislation, Boasso said, all workers -- including the executive directors of individual levee districts -- would be retained. The proposal, however, allows for each board to hire its own regional director after Jan. 1.

All current board members likely will remain in place until Blanco selects regional appointees, Boasso said, adding that common sense dictates that outgoing commissioners participate in a transition period to help orient incoming regional commissioners.

Boasso said another "scare tactic" he has encountered is that taxes raised within individual districts would be mixed into a regional pot.

"Nobody gets anybody's money," he said. "All tax revenue, assets and debts stay within the individual districts where they originate."

No unrelated assets

What will change if the amendment passes is the responsibility for managing and maximizing income from levee board assets unrelated to flood control, which critics say often has distracted commissioners from their primary task. Neither the regional authority nor any district within it would be allowed to own, operate or control any facility not directly related to flood control.

The Orleans Levee District, which owns more property than any of its sister agencies, would be most affected, with Lakefront Airport, its two marinas and swaths of valuable waterfront real estate shifting to the control of the state's Division of Administration while local and state officials decide what to do with them.

After deducting management expenses, the state would transfer any revenue generated by non-flood-control assets to the regional authority for use in the district where the facility is located.

While no one is publicly speaking against the idea, backers of levee board consolidation say they are taking nothing for granted.

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans was scheduled to launch a weeklong, statewide television buy Sunday to encourage passage of the amendment.

"For Louisiana residents who lost their homes, a leadership change in levee board management should be welcome," said Karen Noles, a public relations specialist who is acting as volunteer spokeswoman for the effort.

"And this will send a message to the rest of the nation that we are willing to streamline government and run our state and our city more efficiently. Equally important is for Louisiana to make a statement that we will demand accountability and performance from our elected and our appointed officials as well."

Hiring criteria

In addition to establishing qualifications for board appointees, the amendment calls for setting criteria for hiring directors, something that's never been done before. The proposition, if approved, would require that directors reside within the boundaries of the regional authority and hold at least a bachelor's degree in business, engineering, geology, hydrology, natural or environmental sciences, or a similar field.

Those requirements came under fire from legislators opposed to the amendment.

Dissenters questioned the need for engineers and scientists on boards accustomed to making the kinds of business decisions that the designated professions might be unfamiliar with.

The amendment also would impose new ethics standards for appointees, barring them and members of their immediate families from doing business with the regional authority or any levee district within its jurisdiction.

In addition, board members who agree to serve would be prohibited from running for elected office until one year after the end of their appointed terms. While they serve, appointees would not be allowed to support or oppose candidates or ballot initiatives, raise money for candidates or issues, or play a role in the management of a political campaign or party.

Concessions made

Currently, there are more than 20 levee districts statewide, most of them in southeast Louisiana. The agencies range in size from three to 11 members who are nominated by state legislators and chosen by the governor.

To win the Legislature's approval, proponents of the amendment were forced to make some concessions.

Originally, Boasso wanted to create a single "super" board. But he yielded to West Bank lawmakers who demanded separate authorities on either side of the Mississippi River.

Boasso also agreed to allow levee board police departments to continue to operate and dropped Livingston Parish from the legislation to win support from lawmakers there.

Noles, the Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans spokeswoman, said the group has raised about \$600,000 from businesses and private citizens, who have made contributions as small as \$20.

But Noles said a significant portion of the money likely will be earmarked to push for passage of a separate measure on the Nov. 7 ballot that calls for merging New Orleans' system of seven property assessors into one office.

Noles said the assessor consolidation amendment probably will be a tougher sell for two reasons: It must be approved both in New Orleans and statewide to be enacted, and some of the city's elected assessors are expected to oppose the proposal.

But the first order of business is levee board consolidation, which Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans is promoting through its Web site and a speakers bureau of about a dozen people who, like Boasso, have been touring the state.

The proposal has the support of many of the state's premier watchdog organizations: the Bureau for Governmental Research, the Council for a Better Louisiana, the Public Affairs Research Council, and the Alliance for Good Government chapters in Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and St. Tammany parishes. Several business organizations also support the proposition.

The recommendation by the Public Affairs Research Council sums up the argument put forward by advocates of the amendment.

"The world is watching as Louisiana develops its policies for the future," PAR said. "The state's economic survival depends on reinvestment in the damaged regions and increased investment elsewhere. Business owners are reconsidering the viability of this economy. Homeowners are re-evaluating their options.

"At the very base of their concerns lies the matter of flood control and hurricane protection. If Louisiana does not proactively restructure the way these functions are tended, temporary relocations will become permanent."

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