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Katrina to redraw region's political picture

Shifting populations force restructuring

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New Orleans' losses to Hurricane Katrina are turning out to be St. Tammany Parish and Jefferson Parish's gains, if burgeoning population is considered a plus. On the other hand, the wholesale layoffs at New Orleans City Hall precipitated by the collapse of the tax base are being portrayed in some quarters as an opportunity for long-overdue reform.

Katrina, in other words, did not play fair and square with the New Orleans area. There are winners and losers, though it may be too soon to tell them apart. But all of the most heavily affected areas -- including the devastated downriver parishes, St. Bernard and Plaquemines -- now must grapple with the same question: What's the right size government for a drastically altered political reality?

The answers are not always obvious.

The vast array of fiefdoms that dot New Orleans' political landscape, from a one-of-a-kind roster of seven assessors to dual sheriffs to the multitiered court system, has been controversial for decades.

The city's crazy quilt of elected offices was duplicative, wasteful and patronage-ridden in the best of times, reformers say. And now, in a post-Katrina world with a shrunken city population and pinched financial resources, they say, the bloated system must be liposuctioned.

Curiously, St. Tammany may also be looking to streamline its government, even though the post-Katrina population is almost 30 percent greater than before the storm. A move afoot on the north shore would shrink the Parish Council, perhaps by as much as 50 percent, in the name of efficiency.

One response to Katrina embodied in Gov. Kathleen Blanco's agenda for the legislative session under way in Baton Rouge is to consolidate levee boards, merging the balkanized, highly political dominions into a better coordinated and more consistent flood-fighting force. But on a different front, emergency management, Jefferson Parish is moving in the opposite direction and considering a move that would put emergency headquarters on both sides of the Mississippi River instead of basing the whole operation in Marrero.

Cutting staff

"We cannot afford to do what we've done in the past. It's just not possible," New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said in proposing a 2006 operating budget for the city that he said was \$205 million less than what would be required to provide basic services. "The pressures to create governmental efficiencies are going to be huge."

As any dieter knows, however, downsizing is easier said than done.

Given a thicket of constitutional hurdles, Louisiana's inbred suspicion of change and a political class committed to self-preservation, any move toward smaller government likely will come slowly -- but relentlessly.

City Hall has already begun paring its work force. Nearly 3,000 positions have been eliminated, a move that cuts payroll costs by about 40 percent. But the city's population has fallen proportionately much further, from about 460,000 before Katrina to an estimated 100,000, even including the thousands of relief workers living in downtown hotels.

Although she has not offered specifics beyond her call to consolidate levee boards, Blanco is also calling on lawmakers to discuss ways to reduce the size of state government.

Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which vows by year's end to submit a blueprint for rebuilding the city, intends to review every component of local government that relies on financial aid from the city.

"My goal is to look at anything and everything where this government spends one dollar," said businessman Gary Solomon, who leads the commission's Governmental Efficiency Committee. "We're approaching the task as if we're starting with a blank piece of paper. If we do it right, it could be a model for the nation."

Courts in question

Most discussions about slimming New Orleans' government begin with a fundamental question: Where to start?

The logical first target, reformers say, is the sheer number of elected offices that make up the criminal justice system and their accompanying support staffs.

Will a smaller city still need 12 sections of Criminal Court or 14 divisions of Civil Court? The answers are not simple.

First of all, state law prohibits eliminating an elected position before an incumbent's term has expired. Thus, any proposed reductions might take years to accomplish.

One option is to approach judges about taking early retirement, said state Sen. Edwin Murray, D-New Orleans. If incumbents opt to hang up their robes, the positions could be left unfilled.

Another option might be to transfer judges to areas of the state such as Baton Rouge or St. Tammany Parish that have experienced population growth -- and an accompanying bump in tax revenue -- as a result of Katrina.

"The idea is pretty simple," Murray said. "Send the judges where the people are."

But there are other issues in play.

For instance, the backlog of unresolved cases in some sections at Criminal Court numbered 200 or more before the storm. Though serious crimes such as murder and assault have waned in the weeks since the hurricane, lesser cases have continued to stack up.

As for activity at Civil Court, some legal experts say it would be foolish to assume that a shrunken population will translate into a smaller caseload, particularly given the legal tumult predicted as the region attempts to rebuild.

"In the long run, I think this catastrophe will generate a lot more litigation," said Civil Court Judge Kern Reese, who predicts a surge in lawsuits on a range of issues, from breach of housing rehab contracts to workers' compensation claims to domestic abuse.

"To say you're going to cut back on the court system because you don't think you have enough business right now is real shortsighted," Reese said. "The last thing we want to do is slow down the process."

State Rep. Peppi Bruneau, a Republican from Lakeview who has long championed smaller government, said that if a less-populous, post-Katrina New Orleans has less crime, it is only logical to begin government downsizing in the criminal justice arena.

"It may be the easiest place to start," Bruneau said, "and perhaps the least

difficult political rungs to climb."

Downsizing the city's army of assessors may be a trickier proposition. Even Bruneau shies away from it.

"That's not a political battle that I believe anyone could win," he said. "I just don't see much sentiment among voters to change it. They like being able to reach out and touch their assessors."

Levee system under fire

For years, a favorite target of the smaller-government crowd has been Louisiana's network of two dozen levee boards whose jurisdictions cover much of the state. But each initiative has died a quiet death because governors have shown little stomach for the inevitable political fight.

Blanco resurrected the idea as part of the agenda for the first of two Katrina-related special sessions of the Legislature.

No one expects change to come easily.

Louisiana's loose-knit system of levee districts dates back to the dawn of statehood, when it was seen as a way to spread the cost of construction and maintenance from the shoulders of individual waterfront landowners to everyone who benefited from flood protection.

Critics of the current system say the idea was right for a time when state government lacked the financial and technical ability to provide flood protection and flood-prone communities struggled to stave off disaster. But during the past century, levee boards have evolved into miniature governments that answer only to the governor.

With the state facing so many other pressing issues, many political observers wonder whether the levee board proposal might get lost in the shuffle.

And even if Blanco makes it a priority, she will need plenty of help.

Any change in how levee boards operate requires a constitutional amendment. A two-thirds vote of both houses of the Legislature would be needed, and the measure then would go to a statewide vote.

And local opposition is sure to be stiff. When the governor floated the concept weeks ago, many parish-level levee officials cried foul, saying no one will look out for local interests better than local board members. Yielding to state and national levee priorities might leave them unprotected.

"I don't want to consolidate it with anything that has to do with the state, that's for darn sure," said state Rep. Kenneth Odinet, D-Arabi, voicing a sentiment heard from many local officials.

State Treasurer John Kennedy said the nay-saying is inevitable as state and local governments begin to tamper with timeworn traditions. But in the wake of Katrina, he said, elected officials must behave like a family after the breadwinner loses a job.

"If Dad gets laid off, you postpone the trip to Disneyland," he said. "What makes government different?"

"We need to put aside the parochial interests and the personal interests. There is no pixie dust. The fairy godmother died."

Consolidation helpful?

Like the courts, New Orleans has many layers of law enforcement.

Beyond the two largest organizations, the New Orleans Police Department and

the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office that runs the city's prison, separate police forces patrol property owned by the Levee Board, the Crescent City Connection and the Port of New Orleans.

Before Katrina, those agencies employed more than 3,000 officers at a cost of about \$200 million a year, numbers that many officials say could be reduced through consolidation.

But a 1997 study by the nonprofit Bureau of Governmental Research poured cold water on that thesis. The review found "little functional overlap" among the different jurisdictions. Moreover, the agency found, combining agencies "is likely to create more problems than it would solve."

For example, the study said costs could increase as raises in salaries and pension benefits offset savings from eliminating duplicative functions and facilities.

St. Tammany grows

In St. Tammany, the population has swelled from 216,000 to estimates as high as 280,000 with the influx of evacuees. Some of them will go back where they came from, but the population projection for 2010 stands at 305,000, a jump of 60,000 over prestorm estimates.

The sudden influx of people has created an increasing demand for services, parish officials said. "We could double the number of employees (from 400 to 800) and put them all to work right now," parish spokeswoman Suzanne Parsons-Stymiest said.

But like other storm-zone parishes, St. Tammany is facing financial constraints at least in the short term. Agencies that depend on property taxes will be especially strapped because their revenue likely will decrease because of homes and businesses damaged by Katrina, Parish President Kevin Davis said.

But as the parish grows, a long-dormant suggestion to reduce the size of its governing body is flickering again.

Suggestions of downsizing the council from 14 members to somewhere between seven and 11 members mostly have fallen on deaf ears. But Councilman Marty Gould of Mandeville said he would like to see a referendum on the ballot to reduce the parish governing body. Other suggestions have included making it full time, though Gould said he is concerned about the greater cost of full-time salaries.

As the parish grows, the council needs to become more of a true legislative body as defined by the parish's home rule charter, Gould said. "Right now, you still have people calling council members to get their ditch dug," Gould said.

"As our population gets toward those numbers, it might be an issue to revisit," Davis said. "But during the storm, I liked having 14 members because they were an extension of parish government into their respective districts."

Covering both banks

Even before Katrina, Jefferson Parish was on target to displace Orleans by 2006 as the state's most populous parish. And with an estimated 90 percent of its 453,000 residents thought to have returned, that milestone has been reached ahead of time -- at least for now.

Council members and community leaders already are making nods toward at least a modest reapportioning of public resources, most notably in the areas of emergency management, which were taxed by relief and recovery efforts.

Despite a push in recent years for consolidation of parish services, including the blending of drainage and pump stations departments and of recreation divisions previously separated by the Mississippi River, the council last month moved to consider building a pair of emergency operations centers, one on

each bank, to replace the current facility in Marrero.

"The fact is that there are two bridges that could be damaged in an emergency," council Chairman Tom Capella said. "We have to have steps in place in case something should happen to one or both bridges so we can get to our people. You draw that distinction in emergencies."

Emergency Management Director Walter Maestri also said Jefferson may seek to expand its emergency communications system, which is fractured along political boundaries. "Can we get by with one set of dispatchers, one radio system?" he said.

Additional changes in how the parish operates, including the composition of appointed boards and commission, would follow a population shift that could result in the long term after Katrina.

"The build-up, I believe it's going to be on the West Bank. I'm optimistically expecting a building boom," Capella said, adding that he believes residents of St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes may relocate to Jefferson's lower West Bank, where coastal areas most closely mirror their home communities.

But so far, Planning Director Ed Durabb said, he is not seeing any signs of the boom Capella anticipates. "No one has contacted me on major developments other than proposals from before Katrina," Durabb said. "We may see more once you get away from the storm a little bit and people can sit back and make financial decisions."

Civic activist Pat LeBlanc, who ran a failed 2003 campaign for the council seat held by Capella, said that in the wake of the 2005 hurricane season, merely tweaking local government is a missed opportunity to achieve desperately needed regional cooperation.

Every parish and municipality, regardless of its level of storm destruction, will have to unite to resuscitate New Orleans, the region's economic and cultural core, LeBlanc said.

"No matter where you live, we all love New Orleans," she said. "It's a huge part of what makes life here what we love. Everybody has a vested interest in a real, true revival of New Orleans."

But mayors of two Jefferson cities said they see no need for a wider governing structure.

"To work better for citizens, the smaller you are, the better you are," Westwego Mayor Robert Billiot said. "We were able to get back up and running because of our smallness."

Gretna Mayor Ronnie Harris also opposes melding his government with the parish or some larger regional entity. Indeed, he said, the storm is more likely to force downsizing than amalgamation, given reduced tax revenue resulting from a population that has rebounded to only 80 percent of its prestorm level.

"It doesn't boil down to number of heads," he said. "It boils down to number of dollars."

Waiting for things to settle

As in Orleans, the downsizing debate is not merely academic in St. Bernard Parish. A prestorm parish government of 500 employees has been cut to 260. The rest are on unpaid leave, with medical insurance still in place. The parish says they will be called back as needed -- and they may not be for quite a while.

Parish President Henry "Junior" Rodriguez said he expects only 40 percent of parish residents to be back by Katrina's first anniversary in August. "It'll take five to six years to get back where we were," he said.

St. Bernard lacks the duplicity of agencies and services of New Orleans, so parish officials said their task will be mostly to adjust the size of the government's work force to the current needs and funding. Parish employees who do get asked back may find themselves in different jobs, as the government adapts to a changing community, Rodriguez said.

Not all government functions will be reduced, though. Departments involved in the rebuilding effort, such as public works and the inspection department, will need to grow. Rodriguez said he expects the government's work force to level off at 60 percent of its pre-Katrina levels at least for the next couple of years.

In the law enforcement sector, Sheriff Jack Stephens has temporarily laid off more than 200 employees, halving his department to 182 people. The cuts targeted mostly administrative personnel assigned to duties currently not needed, such as guarding school crossings and serving court subpoenas. Stephens said the size of a rebuilt force will be dictated by how many residents return.

Rodriguez said the same is true for the Fire Department, which employs 104. But because the service needs to be able to respond to fires quickly, officials said any cuts may be limited.

"We're going to play it by ear," Rodriguez said.

No layoffs

Plaquemines Parish has regained an estimated 16,000 of its 28,000 residents, most of them in the Belle Chasse area. Parish President Benny Rousselle said the devastation in lower Plaquemines, where the storm leveled entire towns, will likely cap the parish's population at about 21,000 by August.

Rousselle said he has not laid off any of the parish's 600 employees, though 35 have resigned and another 100 have not returned and are on leave. But he said with less people, and much less revenue, government will have to downsize.

"We're not going to be back at 100 percent," he said. "We'll have to evaluate it based on population, and we're going to get to a point, if we have no revenue, that we'll have to encourage early retirements," he said.

The public school system has 2,500 students, less than half its pre-Katrina enrollment. Its staff has fallen to 549 employees, down from 802.

Bursting at the seams

St. Charles Parish, with a pre-Katrina population of around 50,000, estimates it has gained about 15,000 new residents in the storm's aftermath, based on water usage rates and the more than 700 temporary housing trailers and recreational vehicles absorbed in recent months.

It's straining the parish infrastructure, especially sewerage and water, parish President Albert Laque said, but he anticipates no need to grow government to handle the population influx.

"We can handle it," he said.

Any changes, such as adjusting council districts to reflect shifts in population, would be discussed "way down the road," he said.

Laque expects many evacuees to be impressed by the parish's schools and industrial opportunities and will stay. Subdivisions, such as Ashton Plantation, a proposed 2,000-home development on the west bank, would be likely beneficiaries and a boost to the parish tax base, he said.

"I feel good about it," he said of the parish's growing population. "But we're going to have to sweat for a while to get things straightened out."

A chance to start over

With New Orleans and other municipalities still wrestling with important issues such as crippled electrical grids and where to put trailers for homeless workers, local legislators are doubtful that any concrete ideas will emerge during the current special session of the Legislature or the one scheduled for January.

One reform proponent who expects to play a role in the downsizing effort says that may not be such a bad thing.

"It's obvious that we can't rebuild what we had," said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana. "But given the magnitude of the disaster, it's not going to be something that's easily or quickly done."

First of all, Brandt said, beyond some broad, general goals, there are no "action plans ready to pull off the shelf." Second, he said, most of the proposed changes that have been discussed in the past will impact "popular political institutions" embedded in the state Constitution.

Brandt said the proper approach would be a constitutional convention that would require significant advance planning aimed at producing a game plan that can be submitted to voters for approval. Pledges of assistance have come from the Urban Land Institute, based in Washington, D.C.; the Rockefeller Institute, in New York City; and the Governmental Research Association, a national network of watchdog organizations.

"Any mechanism we propose to redesign state and local government should be done very carefully and very thoughtfully," Brandt said. "We need to fashion the basic framework for constitutional revision ahead of time. Tinkering is not what we want. We need to overhaul the engine."