

## **New Orleans Remembers Katrina, Awaits Gustav**

**City Is 'Better Off'  
Three Years Later,  
But Work Remains**

**By JEFF OPDYKE in New Orleans, ALEX ROTH in Atlanta and LESLIE EATON in Dallas  
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New Orleans will commemorate the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina on Friday under the threat of Tropical Storm Gustav, which is creeping toward a city with many of the same vulnerabilities that proved disastrous in 2005.

Much has been done to repair and strengthen levees and install floodgates and floodwalls along the man-made canals that slice through New Orleans. But for every dollar that has been invested so far, at least three more of the federal dollars approved to shield the city from massive storms remain unspent.

Only in April, for instance, did the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers award a \$695 million contract to build a barrier that would help protect the eastern part of New Orleans from a Gulf of Mexico storm surge of the type that flooded much of the city during Katrina. The project isn't scheduled to be finished for at least another year, according to federal officials.

On Thursday, federal officials were racing to strengthen an 1,800-foot stretch of the Industrial Canal that has been identified as structurally deficient. Workers were buttressing that section of the levee with sand-filled baskets.

A massive hurricane also could expose numerous other weaknesses in other areas -- levees that have yet to be strengthened on the west bank of the Mississippi River; and floodgates that haven't been installed at the mouth of the Industrial Canal, whose walls cracked open three years ago and famously flooded the impoverished Lower 9th Ward.

"We are much better off than we were pre-Katrina," said Randy Cephus, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' hurricane-protection office, based in New Orleans. "We still have a long way to go."

Gustav appears to be one of the biggest threats to the Gulf Coast since the storms of 2005, say forecasters, when hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the shores of Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and parts of Alabama. Gustav was gaining force Thursday as it pounded Jamaica with heavy rains and blew toward the western tip of Cuba. After absorbing the heat of the Gulf's warm waters, the storm is predicted to grow into a Category 3 hurricane over the Labor Day weekend, packing winds of more than 111 miles an hour.

Gustav's path could meander as far west as Texas or east toward Florida. Most forecasts suggested landfall in Louisiana by early Tuesday.

Anticipating a potentially catastrophic storm, state and local officials across a 300-mile swath of coastline stretching from Mississippi to Texas began preparations for massive evacuations expected to begin on Saturday, depending on the storm's course.

Louisiana planned to start evacuating its hospitals as early as Friday. Authorities on Sunday will likely begin its "contraflow plan," turning major roadways into one-way routes away from the coast, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

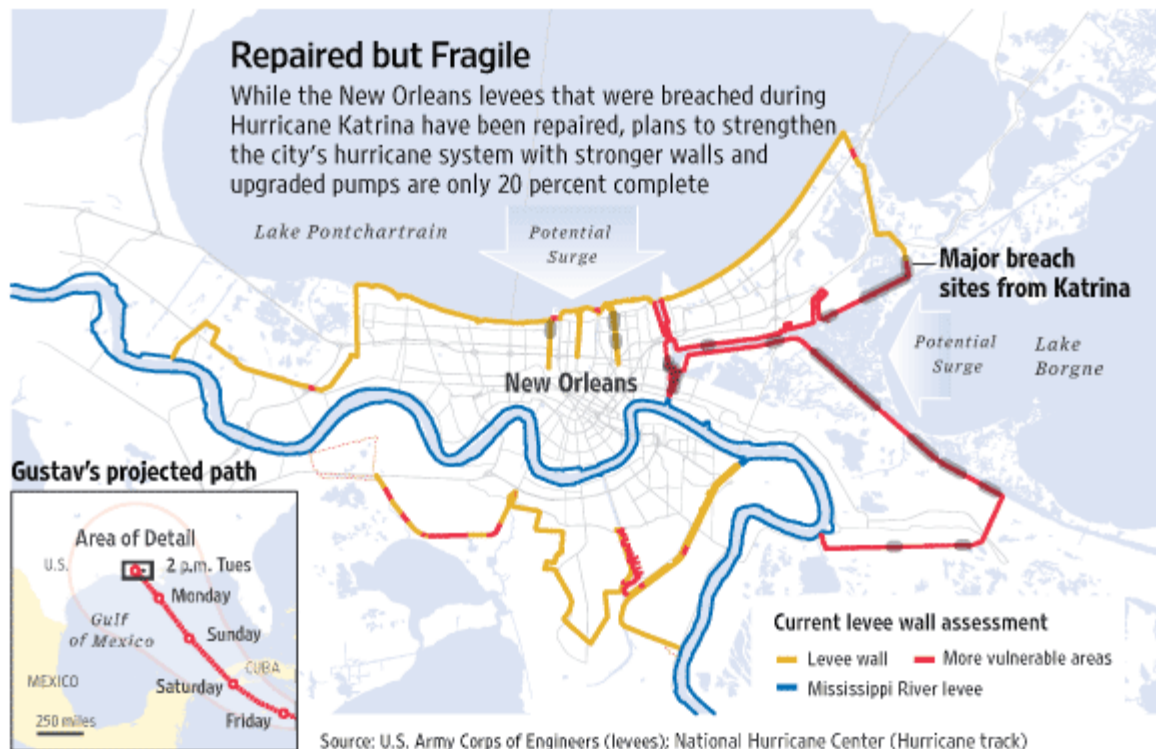
New Orleans plans to begin evacuations 65 hours before the expected arrival of tropical-force winds. Private relief agencies were preparing to deliver water, showers, chain-saw teams and mobile kitchens with a capacity to serve 300,000 to 400,000 meals a day.

Critics of the Corps of Engineers and others in charge of rebuilding the flood defenses of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast say progress has been slow. The levees now may be "a fraction of a percent better" than they were before Katrina, said Sandy Rosenthal, who founded the activist group Levees.org after Hurricane Katrina. "But I think I speak for the citizenry of New Orleans when I say better is not good enough," she said.

Others point to the size and complexity of the task. The New Orleans metropolitan area sits largely on swampland, surrounded by waterways with 350 miles of levees and floodwalls. The Corp of Engineers is in the midst of an estimated \$15 billion post-Katrina project, scheduled to be completed by 2011, that is designed to insulate the city from a storm so strong that its odds of occurring during a given year are 1%.

Of those 350 miles of levees and floodwalls, about 220 miles have been repaired, heightened or strengthened in the past three years.

Congress authorized a total of \$12.8 billion to rebuild levees and floodwalls damaged by Katrina. But only \$3 billion has been spent. The remaining amount includes \$7.6 billion that Congress provided this year.



"This is complicated stuff," said Richard Campanella, a Tulane University geographer who has written extensively about the city's excavation and drainage issues. "These are major engineering projects....It's hard to gauge whether this could have been executed faster."

Despite its shortfalls, New Orleans appears to be in a better position than many other coastal areas threatened by Gustav. Post-Katrina erosion of the delicate wetlands that make up Louisiana's coast has further stripped away a layer of protection from the coastal communities in rural parishes of southwestern Louisiana, says Garret Graves, chairman of the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, a state organization established after hurricanes Katrina and Rita to implement hurricane protection and coastal restoration.

Along the Gulf Coast, progress since Katrina has been slowed by funding and insurance problems. Dozens of communities struck by the 2005 storms are still struggling to put up new housing and reinstall roads and public buildings.

"I think there is a concern if we get another hit of some kind that it is going to be a huge setback," said Karen Rowley, who has studied Katrina's aftereffects as special-projects manager with the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana in Baton Rouge. "We are going to face the issue of a lot of people deciding it is not worth it to stay."

Les Fillingame, the recovery director of Bay St. Louis, Miss., said the town is still waiting for work to begin on a \$30 million seawall project and a \$15 million reconstruction of its main

street. He said there is only one thing his town can do to prepare for another such storm: "Pray."

Across the region, thousands of residents jaded by weeks of lost electricity and services after past storms were booking inland hotels, planning their escape routes and stocking up on emergency supplies. Keith Taylor, assistant manager of a Home Depot in LaPlace, La., just north of New Orleans, said customers were buying "water, generators and anything that will hold gasoline."

Outside the store, Brandon Delaneuille was loading 10 sheets of half-inch-thick plywood into his truck Thursday afternoon. He plans to board up a new house he bought in Reserve, La. He says his wife probably will evacuate with her mother on Saturday while he keeps working. "I'm just going to have to board up the house and hope for the best," he said.

**--Daniel Fitzpatrick, Betsy McKay, Paulo Prada and Corey Dade contributed to this article.**

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