



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Times-Picayune

Bills taking resources away from regional levee boards are threats to flood protection: An editorial

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The Editorial-Staff

Flood protection is one issue that everyone in southeast Louisiana should recognize as paramount, but some state lawmakers are pushing legislation that would actually harm those efforts.

That's unconscionable, and legislators who care about protecting lives and property will vote against House Bill 475 and House Bill 476, measures that would drain vitally needed resources from the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East. Failing that, Gov. Bobby Jindal should veto them.

HB 475 by Rep. Nick Lorusso deals with the Non-Flood Protection Asset Management Authority, which the state Legislature unwisely created in 2007 to manage the old Orleans Levee Board's land holdings. Among other things, the bill adds an additional board member from the flood protection authority, which is innocuous enough.

But an amendment offered by Rep. Lorusso is the real problem: It calls for taking 20 percent of the revenue from a property tax for levee improvement and giving it to the non-flood authority. That translates into about \$4.3 million per year.

Louisiana cannot take this huge step backward on flood protection. After Hurricane Katrina, voters overwhelmingly endorsed new consolidated levee authorities, to be overseen by boards whose members have expertise and training. Lawmakers and citizen activists who championed this effort should be ready to fight to preserve its integrity.

Putting tax dollars intended for flood protection under the control of the non-flood asset board, whose members are appointed by New Orleans lawmakers, would be a return to the patronage-ridden past. Beyond that, the flood protection authority's responsibilities are actually increasing with improvements to the system.

The two authorities can certainly work together on issues that have a clear benefit to flood protection. But control of the money must remain with the flood protection authority.

HB 476, by Rep. Tim Burns, threatens flood protection resources by compelling the levee authority to pay a legal settlement to Bohemia Spillway landowners by July 1, 2020, which translates into \$3.7 million per year.

This bill would put the levee authority in a straight jacket that other governmental entities with judgments against them don't face. Imagine, for example, if the Legislature were to compel a municipality to pay off plaintiffs by a certain date.

Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans, which pushed for the consolidated levee boards, has come out against the Burns bill, which the group says could hurt flood protection.

The rising Mississippi River and the fresh memories of Hurricane Katrina should be all the argument that's needed to kill these wrongheaded measures.

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