



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Media

[Levee Home](#)
[Legislative Activity](#)
[Corps of Engineers
Levee Tour
Nov. 2010](#)
[Levee & Flood
Protection
Contacts](#)
[Archives](#)

Advocate - Baton Rouge, La.

Blanco, activists rally for Amendments 1-4

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NEW ORLEANS - With the fates of a federal oil and gas revenue-sharing bill and several levee- and coast-related state constitutional amendments hanging in the balance, Gov. Kathleen Blanco joined various activist groups Tuesday at a rally near the site of one of the worst levee breaches during Hurricane Katrina.

Blanco and members of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, Women of the Storm, the Coast Guardians and America's WETLAND Campaign gathered on a bridge crossing the 17th Street Canal to encourage Louisiana residents to vote Saturday in favor of Constitutional Amendments 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The governor also used the rally to urge Congress to pass a meaningful oil and gas revenue-sharing bill that would increase the share of royalties going to coastal energy-producing states. Congress goes into recess at the end of the week.

"If they don't act by Friday they still have one more chance (after returning from the midterm elections), but the chances get more difficult," she said. "You don't know what the dynamics will be like when they come back. Our (Louisiana's) own members of Congress are concerned about it, so I'm concerned."

As for the state constitutional amendments, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans founder and chairwoman Ruthie Frierson said passage of the amendments - particularly 1, 2 and 3 - is "critical to all the citizens of the state of Louisiana."

"Flood protection is easy as 1, 2, 3," she said.

Amendments 1 and 2 are designed to financially bolster coastal restoration and protection. No. 1 would authorize the use of oil and gas revenue for coastal conservation, restoration, hurricane protection and structures affected by wetland losses. No. 2 says that, if the state sells its remaining share of a national tobacco lawsuit settlement, 20 percent of the proceeds would go to a Coastal Protection and Restoration Fund.

"We will invest it wisely," Blanco assured. "We are a smart people."

"There is no doubt how Louisiana will use them," Coast Guardians member Bruce Thompson said of any offshore oil and gas royalty money the state receives.

Amendment 3 would revamp levee oversight in low-lying areas. That oversight currently is in the hands of boards named by the governor with input from lawmakers. Those levee districts would remain intact if the amendment is approved, but the boards that oversee them would be abolished and two boards would be set up - comprising engineers, hydrologists and other experts, or what Blanco called "the best decision-makers possible" - to regulate levee operations in the New Orleans area and nearby parishes, starting Jan. 1.

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans members held signs that proclaimed "Levee Board 1 Voice" and "YES Amendment #3."

"We feel that levee board reform is a critical first step in the right direction," Levees.org founder Sandy Rosenthal said while helping to hold a banner demanding "Hold the Corps Accountable."

Amendment 4 would restrict the amount paid to property owners for land the government takes for hurricane protection. Blanco said the amount would be the home's fair market value.

Women of the Storm founder Anne Milling predicted that Amendments 1, 2 and 3 would follow the lead of the New Orleans Saints.

"We too are going to have victory Saturday, Sept. 30," she said. The Saints defeated the Atlanta Falcons, 23-3, Monday night in its first home game since Katrina struck.

Proponents of Amendment 3 contend better levee oversight is needed to persuade industry to start over in a region that accounts for slightly more than a third of the state's economy. Milling said the approval of Amendments 1, 2 and 3 would "alter the way business is done in our state."

"With their passage, we will send shockwaves around the country," she said.

Blanco called Amendments 1 through 4 "the complete package."

"This is critical to our future, and the future of the United States," she said, referring to south Louisiana's petroleum and seafood industries. "Louisiana brings a high quality of life to citizens across the country."

"Louisiana feeds and fuels the nation, but we're washing away," Milling added.

The governor said south Louisiana lost 200 square miles of wetlands to hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"Our wetlands are melting away," she said, stressing the state's need for a fair share of offshore oil and gas royalties to help bolster the state's coast. "Coastal restoration gives us the front- line hurricane protection."

Louisiana officials have argued for years that the state receives next to nothing for the oil and natural gas produced off and piped through its coast. The federal government reaps about \$5 billion annually.

"We are very justified in getting a share of this revenue stream," Blanco said. "We want respect and we want to be treated appropriately."

A U.S. House of Representatives revenue-sharing bill could mean up to \$1 billion a year for Louisiana. A U.S. Senate version would mean about \$200 million a year until 2017, rising to \$600 million a year thereafter.

[Illustration]

Caption: B.W. photo of Gov. Kathleen Blanco speaking on the importance of the first four amendment proposals on Saturday's statewide ballot during a news conference at the 17th Street Canal in New Orleans. (By Arthur D. Lauck)

Credit: New Orleans bureau

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