



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Called to Action

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By Brian Thevenot, Staff Writer

One day in late November, news reports of the state Legislature's unceremonious killing of a bill to consolidate the New Orleans area's levee boards stirred Patti Lapeyre from her couch to the telephone. She started dialing legislators, outraged at what she viewed as a victory of patronage fiefdoms over a no-brainer reform plan.

Before that moment, the Uptown homemaker had lived blissfully uninvolved in politics, immersed in motherhood and a tranquil lifestyle. She had never called a legislator before in her life.

What Lapeyre didn't know at the time was that the same scene had played out in dozens of other homes, where similarly outraged women had started calling and writing politicians -- and one another. That afternoon, Lapeyre met with 120 people in the gracious home of Ruthie Frierson, a real estate agent who would become the chairwoman of the fledgling Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans.

Though few of the women had ever petitioned their government before for anything, their outrage boiled over into action in ways seldom seen in a city historically renowned for its civic apathy, where rogue politicians often serve as fodder for cocktail-hour entertainment rather than targets of principled protest.

"From there, the group just mushroomed like the atom bomb," said Kay Kerrigan, a friend of Lapeyre's who invited her to the meeting at Frierson's house, where the elegant dining room has since been dubbed the "war room."

An incredible response

Two weeks later, Lapeyre and a fast-growing network of novice activists had collected more than 40,000 signatures to support a unified levee board staffed with engineers and have drawn as many as 700 people to meetings at an Uptown church. The group now has nearly 53,000 signatures and plans to bring more than 800 people on 11 buses to Baton Rouge today as state legislators begin their special session, called in part because of pressure the group brought to bear on Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

To keep the pressure on during the session, the group has lined up more than 60 volunteer lobbyists who will monitor every committee meeting where levee boards are discussed.

Agree with them or not, the rapid growth of the levee activists' ranks serves as just one example of an emerging wave of civic involvement in a city struggling for survival and, as some in Lapeyre's group frankly admit, embarrassed at the broadcasting of the state's political antics on a national stage. Kerrigan and Lapeyre traveled to Washington last week with another new group, Women of the Storm, who have concentrated on persuading national politicians to tour the flood devastation.

"It was quite apparent to us that they laugh at us" in Washington, Kerrigan said, speaking generally about the state's sullied political image. "They think we're just a bunch of crooks down here."

Signs of a new culture of civic involvement cross race and class lines and the geography of the city. In Broadmoor, a recent neighborhood association meeting drew about 600 people seeking to ensure that the neighborhood remains viable after one planning recommendation suggested converting part of the area into a park. Broadmoor Improvement Association President Latoya Cantrell said the group is surveying residents to determine who's staying or going, while also trying to persuade those who are leaving to sell to other neighborhood residents.

Getting involved

In Eastern New Orleans on Jan. 28, roughly a thousand people attended a meeting at St. Maria Goretti Church, calling for the closure of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, or MR-GO, a shipping channel widely thought to have contributed to the area's flooding. Sitting in a

guttured auditorium, with wind whipping debris into their eyes, the crowd chanted, "GO must go!"

In the French Quarter, at a weekly town hall forum held at Oswald's, the club owned by comedian Harry Anderson, crowds have spilled into the street. The forum, which features political and media speakers, has been moved to nearby Cafe Brasil because of lack of space.

Gentilly residents have formed the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association, which seeks to serve as an umbrella group for smaller neighborhood associations representing enclaves within the sprawling, severely flooded neighborhood. The group has registered about 200 members in just a week, and has seen more at meetings, said its president, Scott Darrah. So far the group has concentrated on cleanup efforts but is gearing up to be a political force and leader in planning for the area's redevelopment.

"We intend to advocate for what we believe is in Gentilly's best interests, and these days, that means there's no way to avoid the political process," he said.

But among all of the new activism, the citizen levee lobbyists are among those who have gained the most traction, said political analyst Ed Renwick, director of Loyola University's Institute of Politics.

"It surprised me that they caught on so fast and so effectively. Ordinarily you don't expect that to happen, especially in New Orleans," he said. "They sure shook the politicians up. . . . All of a sudden, it (a unified levee board bill) moved from the bottom of the governor's agenda to the top."

Others have credited the group with playing the lead role in forcing the governor to call a special session to address levee boards and other urgent issues. Gov. Blanco allowed through a spokeswoman that she was impressed by the number of signatures the group had gathered in a short time. She since has agreed to back the bill after negotiations with its sponsors, Sen. Walter Boasso, R- Arabi, and Rep. Karen Carter, D-New Orleans.

Before the flood, it would have been unthinkable that an issue as arcane as government consolidation of levee boards, then near the bottom of the political food chain, could garner so much attention, much less activism. But Katrina's floodwaters rocketed the issue into the mom-and-apple-pie mainstream, a rallying point for undirected rage. The issue's profile was boosted further by a federal government directive that required that \$12 million in federal funding to study flood protection be contingent on the state unifying its levee boards, an indication that federal elected officials didn't look kindly on the state's balkanized system of levee oversight.

Devotion to the cause

Soon after her organization gelled, Lapeyre took over the coordination of the signature drive, along with a thousand other tedious tasks. Her mother and siblings also have put in countless hours, and her husband has pitched in by coming home from work earlier to mind their three children, sharing carpool duties and cooking the family breakfast.

"It's been at least 12-hour days," she said. "My children's lives have changed because of this."

Others in the group have put in countless hours on the campaign while holding down day jobs, including public relations specialist Karyn Noles Bewley, a vice president for the Audubon Nature Institute.

"I tell people this is my '9 to 12 job,' " she said, "as in, 9 p.m. to midnight."

For the nine women on the steering committee of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, pushing for reform has become the antidote to a feeling of helplessness and depression brought on by watching friends, neighbors and children lose their homes or jobs, some forced to leave the city.

Since the day the first levee reform bill died, the only day the women didn't meet together to work was Christmas.

Some have branded the group as simply the "Uptown women" or the "levee ladies" or, as in one published letter to the editor, the "auxiliary wives" of the business lobby, citing their close connection to the city's Business Council, which is headed by Lapeyre's brother-in-law, Jay Lapeyre.

The women resist being pigeonholed as an exclusively Uptown -- and by implication, all-white -- or all-female group, saying they're working on a statewide issue with broad support. Indeed, they display a certain self-consciousness about the lack of diversity in their inner circle.

Trying to diversify

At one of the steering committee's daily meetings last week, the group gathered in Frierson's war room in her spacious traditional home just steps from Audubon Park. Frierson, with perfectly coiffed golden hair, a gold sweater and gold-and-diamond jewelry, sat beneath a gold-painted ceiling as the women talked about how the rally might come off on TV.

Someone suggested that their group of 60 volunteer lobbyists -- they prefer to call them "citizen supporters" -- could stand behind the podium, in a show of strength. Then they decided against it.

"That won't look right," said Betsy Nalty.

"Oh yeah, too white. Plain old white," quipped Kerrigan.

The group has tried hard to reach out to other groups, including Vietnamese and African-American activists in the city, said Mimi Smith, but said it has been hard to pull them away from other more pressing concerns, such as the rebuilding of their own homes and fighting for the viability of neighborhoods. Women from Uptown, by contrast, have more time on their hands because most Uptown homes didn't flood, and they said they want to use that time to accomplish what they see as the greater good.

Moreover, on the group's petition drives, they get enthusiastic reactions no matter where they go or whom they approach, from shoppers at Lakeside Mall to protesters at a December rally in Congo Square. Unlike so many touchy post-Katrina issues, the unification of levee boards unites rather than divides people of divergent backgrounds and neighborhoods, Smith and others said.

"This is the easiest job I've ever had," she said. "You say 'one levee board,' and people say, 'Where do I sign?' "

Battling politicians

On Thursday, the levee activists held two pep rallies, one in the morning, one in the afternoon, at St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian church.

At the morning meeting, attended by a couple hundred supporters, Jay Lapeyre stood at the microphone and paraphrased a famous quote.

"The price of liberty is eternal vigilance," he said. "We've already learned the price of apathy: incompetence and corruption. We need to create an environment where good acts are rewarded and bad acts are punished."

Lapeyre struggled to contain her smile after the meeting, as she sat in a pew hugging her daughter, Lucy, whom Lapeyre allowed to take the day off from school because she so seldom gets to spend time with her lately.

"I don't know why I'm having so much fun doing this," she said. "I guess I was just bitten by the need. I don't want to leave here. I want my children to live here, and it makes me so angry to see my city so hurt -- and we can change it."

Back on that Monday in November, the only legislator who called Patti Lapeyre back was Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers, part of a crew of West Bank politicians who helped kill the original levee consolidation bill. Arnold and others will push a two-levee-board system in the upcoming session, one for the east bank, another for the West Bank, on the theory that each is subject to different flooding threats.

When Lapeyre spoke to Arnold that day on the phone, she said, he told her the vote that killed the measure initially -- a procedure vote that prevented it from moving to the House transportation committee -- didn't much matter. The committee would have killed it anyway, Arnold said.

"He said it was a procedural issue that killed the bill, not the merits of the issue," she recalled. "I didn't even know they could do that . . . I said, 'Well, I can't stand for that answer.' "

What it really says

Arnold said he didn't recall the phone call, but that the levee lobbyists have pelted him with more than 500 e-mail messages since that day, and he has responded to each explaining his position. Arnold said he appreciates the engaged constituents, but said frankly that most of the e-mail messages he has received come from people who don't know what they're talking about.

Asked about the levee advocates, he cracked, "You mean the one that didn't even know what was in the bill?"

Arnold said he supports levee board reform in general, but the original bill killed by the House was fatally flawed. It left control over the "money issues" -- the police department, marinas, the Lakefront Airport, and other items that have nothing to do with flood protection -- in the hands of the Orleans Parish Levee Board, leaving avenues for corruption and patronage intact, Arnold said.

The levee activists concede that the original bill had problems, but say legislators easily could have amended it or at least given it a fair hearing.

Arnold said he won't support Boasso's new bill, considered the brass ring by the citizens group activists, because it has no guarantees for the West Bank and what Arnold believes are its unique flooding concerns. Boasso's bill calls for eight appointees from eight parishes, but the appointees from Orleans and Jefferson all could come from the East Bank.

"I'm glad to have the activism, but anytime I've gotten into any discussion with people who favor the bill, via e-mail on or the street, they weren't informed," Arnold said.

Boasso's bill would create a single agency called the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority, to oversee levee districts in Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. Tammany, Livingston and Tangipahoa parishes only below Interstate 12. The east banks of St. Charles and St. John would be removed from the Pontchartrain Levee District and put under a single new district called the West Lake Pontchartrain Levee District. St. Tammany, Livingston and Tangipahoa do not have

parishwide districts, which would have to be created under the legislation and placed under the new authority.

The challenge from Arnold and other West Bank legislators is only one of the threats that Boasso's bill will face. Separate efforts in the works seek to transfer functions other than flood protection to a separate local entity, rather than to the state Department of Administration, as Boasso proposes; another would fold levee board duties into parish governments.

All are smokescreens, Boasso contends, seeking the maintenance of "politics, control and money."

Though some see Boasso's legislation as highly likely to pass, he and the citizen group backing him are not so confident.

"I don't know how I feel about it," he said with a long sigh, adding that U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal's recent statement in support of two separate levee boards for the east and west banks doesn't help his cause. "But I still have the citizens on my side. They're about the only thing I got. I just pray to God we don't embarrass ourselves in front of the nation again, like last time."

Though they've worked single-mindedly on levee board reform, the activists have at times brought up the notion of taking on other issues in the future, keeping the organization alive indefinitely, as the call for "eternal vigilance," the group's unofficial motto, would suggest.

For now, however, Lapeyre talks like a football player heading into a big playoff game, preferring not to concern herself with anything beyond the immediate challenge.

"I can't even think about any of that now," she said. "I've just been so focused on this."

Jay Lapeyre said that narrow focus should serve as a model for success. Many civic groups try to take on a full panoply of issues at once, ending up not accomplishing much on any of them.

Kerrigan, however, said she can't help but hope that the organization will grow into a wider movement once levee board issues are settled. If a city in the throes of despair can't force lasting reforms now, she said, there's no hope.

"We've had it with business as usual; if we don't make a change now, with Katrina, we're never going to make a change," Kerrigan said. "We're demanding that the whole culture of politics in Louisiana change."

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