



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Times-Picayune

Gov. Jindal, Louisiana Legislature shouldn't undermine levee reforms: Editorial

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Gov. Bobby **Jindal wants more control** over who serves on the two levee authorities that oversee flood protection for Southeast Louisiana. That's not surprising, given how upset he was about the lawsuit the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East filed last year in hopes of forcing oil companies to pay for damage to the state's coastline.

But giving the governor more sway is a bad idea. The whole purpose of post-Katrina levee board reforms was to remove them as much as possible from politics.

Residents demanded that the old crony-laden boards be consolidated and that board members have autonomy and the technical expertise to hold the Army Corps of Engineers accountable for its work.

The post-Katrina transformation of the levee boards has been among the most positive changes in our region. The new flood protection authorities are vastly better watchdogs than the old boards.

That is due in large part to board members' credentials and the independent process for choosing them.

Now Sen. Robert Adley, at Gov. Jindal's request, has filed a bill that would undermine that process and let the governor reject nominations for the board until he gets someone he likes.

Under Sen. Adley's bill, if the governor refused all the names submitted by the nominating committee, the group would have to send him an entirely new set of nominees. Currently, the nominating committee can resubmit a nominee the governor has rejected.

Taking that power away from the committee would be a significant step backward.

Sen. Adley's bill would give the governor "de facto veto power over the flood authority nominating committee," Sandy Rosenthal, founder of **levees.org**, said in a press release Thursday. Requiring three nominations for each vacancy also would make it harder for the nominating committee to find enough qualified applicants, the release said.

Robert Scott, president of the Public Affairs Research Council and a member of the levee authority nominating committee, pointed out last week that the governor already has significant power under the current system. "But the idea that he can now go back and ask for new nominees, that negates the need for the committee," Mr. Scott said.

The levee reforms in 2006 were "specifically crafted to try to lift the New Orleans region out of the old ways of doing things, in which just a small number of politicians were controlling who got on these very important and influential levee authorities," he said. "Now we have a system that, while not perfect, is more independent than it used to be."

No matter how they feel about the levee authority's lawsuit, Gov. Jindal and Sen. Adley should honor those reforms.

In October 2006, voters overwhelmingly approved the constitutional amendment that created the two new levee authorities. Not only that, outraged citizens helped get the reforms through the Legislature.

When then-state Sen. Walter Boasso proposed merging multiple Southeast Louisiana levee boards shortly after Katrina and the levee breaches in 2005, lawmakers shot him down.

That was during the first special session of the Legislature after the disaster. At that point, some politicians mistakenly thought they could continue business as usual, including the patronage-ridden levee board system.

They were wrong.

Within days of the reform bill's demise, 120 New Orleans residents fanned out across the city with petitions. The group, which became **Citizens for One Greater New Orleans**,

quickly got more than 50,000 signatures urging Gov. Kathleen Blanco to call a special session on levee board reform.

She did, and lawmakers came to their senses and approved a levee consolidation bill.

A whopping 94 percent of New Orleans voters approved the constitutional amendment creating the new levee authorities in October 2006. Nine out of 10 voters in Jefferson, St. Tammany and St. Bernard parishes voted for the amendment.

Those voters understood how vital it was to our recovery to have efficient, accountable and professional oversight of flood protection. They wanted to get rid of the political cronies that made up the old boards.

It would be a betrayal of them to insert politics back into the process.

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