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Voters merge levee boards

Support strongest where effect greatest

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By Frank Donze, Staff writer

A citizens campaign to abandon politics-as-usual culminated Saturday in an overwhelming statewide vote to consolidate southeast Louisiana's balkanized system of levee boards and replace them with flood protection authorities that will be governed for the first time by appointees with expertise in fields such as engineering and hydrology.

The amendment to the state Constitution, which also strips levee boards of responsibilities and assets unrelated to flood control, was one of 11 amendments on a list of 13 that appeared poised to win voter approval, with 97 percent of precincts counted. The ballot also included races for secretary of state, insurance commissioner and a host of local offices.

"It's a great victory for people who want to see Louisiana crawl out of the dark ages," said state Sen. Walter Boasso, the Arabi Republican who authored the levee board legislation and, with Gov. Kathleen Blanco's support, steered it through a resistant Legislature.

"Finally, we're seeing some light of reform."

With only pockets of tepid opposition visible, the amendment enjoyed widespread backing across the state, garnering support from eight of every 10 voters who went to the polls. The support was only stronger among residents who stand to be most affected by the measure. With virtually all precincts reporting, at least 90 percent of voters in Jefferson, St. Bernard and St. Tammany parishes gave their nod to the amendment.

In New Orleans, with 97 percent of precincts reporting, the measure had 94 percent backing. Support was slightly weaker, though still overwhelming, in Plaquemines Parish, where 85 percent of residents voted yes.

While overhauling the disjointed, highly politicized network of some 20 coastal levee boards has long been a hot topic in Baton Rouge, the idea gained traction only after catastrophic post-Katrina flooding focused national attention on the issue.

With Washington decision-makers who control billions in recovery dollars demanding proof that Louisiana leaders are committed to spending the money wisely, rank-and-file citizens banded together last year to push for an overhaul of the levee boards' governance. Beyond the issue of cronyism and patronage games under the old levee board system, proponents of the change argued that the New Orleans region's fragmented system of flood-control and hurricane protection contributed to the deadly flooding.

The push for consolidation was led by Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, an alliance of activists and business leaders who joined forces to champion the cause.

The organization raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote the levee amendment, listed as No. 3 on the ballot, as well as a separate measure that will appear on the Nov. 7 ballot that calls for merging New Orleans' system of seven property assessors into one office.

Financial concerns

Although there was no organized opposition to the levee board consolidation plan, a Web site titled citizensagainstantendment3.com surfaced around midweek. The site, which raised what Boasso labeled unfounded concerns that revenue would be siphoned from suburban levee districts to keep the financially troubled Orleans Levee District afloat, did not list the names of organizers, and efforts to reach the group by e-mail were unsuccessful.

By approving the amendment, voters have cleared the way for consolidation of levee boards in St. Bernard Parish; the east banks of Orleans, Jefferson, St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes; and the southern portions of St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes. A separate board will cover areas on the west bank of the Mississippi River.

The two levee districts will be overseen by separate boards -- composed of 11 members on the east bank and seven on the west bank -- to be appointed by the governor for staggered terms ranging from one to four years. Under the legislation, no appointee can serve more than two consecutive four-year terms.

The boards will be overseen by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, created by Blanco and the Legislature in November to supervise local levee boards and set state levee priorities. Under the legislation, the authority will "serve as the single state entity to act as local sponsor for construction, operation, and maintenance of hurricane, storm damage reduction, flood control and coastal restoration."

Time for nominations

With victory in hand, Boasso said the next step toward a unified approach to flood protection will be to assemble a roster of nominees for seats on the two regional authorities.

Under a change that amendment supporters said will go a long way toward overcoming Louisiana's reputation as a swamp of corruption, levee board members -- long chosen largely through political connections -- will be replaced by accountants, lawyers, engineers, hydrologists, geologists or professionals in other water-related fields.

The new appointees, who will be chosen by Blanco from lists submitted by universities and professional engineering organizations, are scheduled to assume their duties Jan. 1, when the current boards go out of business.

But Boasso said common sense dictates that there will be a period of transition during which outgoing commissioners can help to orient the incoming regional commissioners. "It's going to take some real statesmanship to get this in motion," he said. "Hopefully, people will step up to the plate, do the right thing and forget about politics to help us get this done."

Boasso said preliminary meetings with the nominating groups have been going on for weeks and he hopes to deliver names to the governor in the next 30 to 60 days. Among the groups charged with drafting nominees are the engineering schools at Louisiana State University, Tulane University, the University of New Orleans and Southern University plus the American Institute of Hydrology, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Public Affairs Research Council and the Council for a Better Louisiana.

Focus on flood control

In a major departure from past policy, the new boards will no longer be responsible for managing and maximizing income from levee board assets unrelated to flood control, a task that critics said has distracted commissioners from their primary task.

Effective Jan. 1, neither the regional authority nor any district within it will be allowed to own, operate or control any facility not directly related to flood control.

The Orleans Levee District, which owns more property than any of its sister agencies, will be most affected, with Lakefront Airport, its two marinas and swaths of valuable waterfront real estate shifting to the control of the state Division of Administration while local and state officials decide what to do with them.

After deducting management expenses, the state will transfer any revenue generated by non-flood-control assets to the regional authority for use in the district where the facility is located.

New regulations

In addition to establishing qualifications for board appointees, there now will be criteria for hiring directors, something that's never been done before. For example, district managers will be required to live within the boundaries of the regional authority and to hold at least a bachelor's degree in business, engineering, geology, hydrology, natural or environmental sciences or a similar field.

And for the first time, board appointees will be subjected to new ethics standards, barring them and members of their immediate families from doing business with the regional authority or any levee district within its jurisdiction.

Board members also will be prohibited from running for elected office for one year after the end of their appointed terms. While they serve, appointees will not be allowed to support or oppose candidates or ballot initiatives, raise money for candidates or issues, or play a role in the management of a political campaign or party.

Currently, there are more than 20 levee districts statewide, most of them in southeast Louisiana. The agencies range in size from three to 11 members who are nominated by state legislators and chosen by the governor.

The merger amendment was first proposed last fall during a special legislative session called to address Katrina-related issues. After that effort failed, the idea was taken up again in a second special session that ended in February.

To win the Legislature's approval, proponents of the consolidation plan were forced to make several concessions.

Originally, Boasso advocated a single "super" board. But he yielded to West Bank lawmakers who demanded separate authorities for each side of the Mississippi River. Boasso also agreed to allow levee board police departments to continue to operate, and he dropped Livingston Parish from the legislation to win support from lawmakers there.

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Staff writer Michelle Krupa contributed to this report.

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