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Times-Picayune

Morrell backs off plan to turn over non-flood assets Substitute bill calls for new commission

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By Ed Anderson, Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- A bill that could have turned over the non-flood assets of the Orleans Levee District to New Orleans City Park was scuttled Thursday by its chief sponsor, who opted to study the disposition of the property and come back with a solution by 2011.

Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, asked the Senate Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works to shelve his original Senate Bill 153 and substitute in its place an unnumbered measure calling for the study.

Morrell's original bill would have taken the non-flood assets, such as park land and marinas of the levee district, and turned them over to City Park -- except for the district-owned Lakefront Airport.

Morrell's original bill also would have required the district to turn over to the park an additional 30 percent of the property taxes it receives. The revenues are now managed by the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, the agency that took over flood protection from the levee district three years ago.

The original bill called for the changes to go into effect Jan. 1.

Morrell backed off the proposal and said that more time is needed to think through the issues involved.

"The non-flood assets are parked there," he said. "This (substitute bill) gets all the stakeholders involved together and will determine who should manage them and if they should be sold. . . . This puts everything on the table," including the future of Lakefront Airport, Morrell said.

Morrell's new bill calls for an 11-member commission of lawmakers, district officials, and representatives of the flood authority, the airport, the Orleans Marina, neighborhood associations and state agencies to do the study. The bill requires that the first meeting must be held by Aug. 15; it requires a minimum of three more meetings by Feb. 1.

The bill requires that an interim report be submitted to the Senate committee by March 15 and a final report turned in by Feb. 1, 2011. Morrell said the final recommendations must "detail the final procedure and process for the operation, maintenance, sale, lease or transfer of any facility or improvement" managed or controlled by the levee district.

The bill calls for the commission go out of business on March 1, 2011.

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