



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: Divided we flood

Date: Feb 8, 2006

Editorial

During their first post-Katrina special session last year, Louisiana lawmakers had a chance to show that our devastated state is serious about flood protection. And they blew it. Big-time.

In the current session, which began Monday, legislators will have a chance to fix their mistake. And the state's prospects for recovery will brighten if they make the most of it.

Last time around, State Sen. Walter Boasso had submitted a bill to consolidate greater New Orleans' patronage-ridden levee boards into a single professionally run agency. But lawmakers were slow to recognize how many residents of greater New Orleans were fed up with business as usual. Sen. Boasso's bill failed, because Gov. Kathleen Blanco was officially neutral toward it and some of her key allies worked against it.

But lots of angry citizens made it clear after the session that they don't want their lawmakers to play politics with levees -- and that they want a flood-protection agency that cares more about keeping people dry than about handing out lucrative contracts to the politically connected. That message has gotten through to Gov. Blanco, who is supporting Sen. Boasso's latest effort to reform the region's dysfunctional levee boards.

Passing a consolidation bill would be a signal that Louisiana lawmakers understand the breadth and depth of our state's plight.

Sending such a message is vital. Business owners who have relocated temporarily to Baton Rouge or Houston want to know whether the state will take even modest steps to curb political patronage. Meanwhile, getting more aid from Washington will be a struggle even if Louisiana shows that it is doing everything possible to spend wisely and keep citizens safe. If legislators squander another opportunity to make government more efficient, they'll only provide Louisiana's critics with an excuse not to help.

But the benefits of consolidated levee board aren't just political.

Greater New Orleans currently does not have a levee agency with the ability to push back against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. A single, professional-minded levee agency would have the power, the technical expertise and the singular focus necessary to hold the corps accountable for its work. Existing levee boards, by contrast, have not provided the necessary oversight.

Unfortunately, passage of a consolidation bill is hardly a given, even with Gov. Blanco's support. Opponents are trying to capitalize on some West Bank residents' fears that a so-called super-board will ignore their neighborhoods' concerns.

But the West Bank politicians who are fighting the merger ultimately aren't protecting local interests. Instead, they're leaving their constituents at the mercy of the corps, an agency whose mistakes led to the deaths of more than 1,000 residents of this metro area.

Granted, most of the West Bank avoided major flood damage during Katrina. But that was luck. A slight change in the hurricane's track could have led to major damage on both banks of the Mississippi River.

Playing one side of the river against the other -- or playing city, suburb and countryside against one another -- is a time-honored way of muddying issues in Southeast Louisiana. But the fate of each part of this metro region is tied to that of every other part of the region. Lawmakers need to remember that -- and take the opportunity to consolidate the area's small, ineffective levee boards into a single agency that works.

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