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[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Media

[Levee Home](#)
[Legislative Activity](#)
[Corps of Engineers
Levee Tour
Nov. 2010](#)
[Levee &
Flood
Protection
Contacts](#)
[Archives](#)

Fighting the nausea to fix the levee boards

Sunday, September 17, 2006

Stephanie Grace

If legislation can be compared to sausage, the product of last spring's levee board consolidation drive resembles the least appetizing variety: the kind where you can actually see the gory innards.

What started out as a relatively straight-up effort to disband political fiefdoms and replace them with one regional and tightly focused flood control agency was forced, inevitably, through the Baton Rouge meat grinder, and emerged quite a bit messier, thanks to individual legislators more focused on defending turf.

What was originally conceived as one regional levee board became two, one on each side of the Mississippi River, with some parishes left out altogether.

Where proponents wanted to get rid of functions that are not directly related to flood control, some remained. The Orleans and East Jefferson Levee police departments, for example, would not be disbanded if the amendment passes, although the legislature could choose to abolish them.

Even without local levee boards, revenue, based largely on locally approved millages in most places, would still be kept in separate pots. That way, one parish's property taxes wouldn't pay for another parish's projects, even if those projects would make everyone safer.

Money owed would remain at the district level too. That's probably a necessity, given that the Orleans Levee Board has the most far-reaching operations, what with its many money-making assets and large debt. The complicated question of what to do with the airport and marinas, after much back and forth, was settled by a proposed transfer of those properties to the state, for now, with revenue returning to the district to pay down debt.

And yet, ugly as the final product is, it's a lot better looking than what we have now.

Sen. Walter Boasso and Gov. Kathleen Blanco, the effort's most prominent official supporters, decided early on that they could live with concessions in order to get what they really wanted in the bill, and so were the citizen groups that pushed for reform.

Jim Brandt, President of the Public Affairs Research Council and a supporter of the constitutional amendment, conceded as much.

"We think it is a huge improvement, despite the fact that it's not what we wanted initially," he said.

The amendment, he said, would still keep the overall focus on flood control. Members of the new regional boards would have specific expertise, not just political connections, which Brandt labeled a "huge addition." There would be no politicians on the levee boards, nobody with immediate political aspirations, and most importantly, nobody who might have a conflict of interest. And despite the separation of finances, flood protection planning, like flood waters, would cross political boundaries.

Despite all that, there are still those who are nervous about the amendment, who say there are too many questions over how the new regime would work, whether the financial lines would hold, whether some responsibilities would fall through the cracks.

There are others who merely claim such concerns, when their real agenda is avert a power shift.

What they all ignore is that the unknowns can be worked out. The amendment is a big picture change; the little pieces would eventually fall into place. Somebody would still cut the grass at parks now managed by levee boards, even if it's unclear right now exactly who would sign the grasscutters' paychecks. It's really not that daunting.

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Consolidation advocates probably made the typical post-Katrina mistake of assuming they were staring at a blank slate, rather than a convoluted web of responsibilities and interests that took years to develop, and didn't disappear in the flood waters.

Opponents risk making the much more serious error of using that as an excuse, of saying that the old ways, even when they've clearly failed, are just too difficult to change.

The far worse thing, it seems, is not to even try.

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