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The WashingtonPost.com

La. Voters to Weigh Fate of Levee Boards

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By DOUG SIMPSON, The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS -- Louisiana voters decide Saturday whether to overhaul the multitude of boards that oversee the New Orleans area's levees after the agencies were accused of cronyism, inefficiency and ineptitude in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

A proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot would consolidate the 10 boards into two _ one for each bank of the Mississippi River _ and require that their members have broad expertise in engineering, geology and hydrology.

After Katrina breached New Orleans' levees just over a year ago, the system of politically appointed boards was criticized as disjointed, rife with cronyism, patronage and self-dealing, and badly lacking in technical know-how.

The boards are responsible for levee upkeep and inspections, but critics say they have become distracted with other projects. The board in New Orleans, for example, leased land to a riverboat casino and also runs marinas, an airport and a police force.

Supporters of the measure said its passage would signal to the nation that Louisiana is taking responsibility for its own flood protection and moving away from its history of corruption.

"I think it absolutely builds credibility and support up here, when Louisiana takes on these important reform measures," Sen. David Vitter, R-La., said from Washington.

State lawmakers from the New Orleans area tried to block the measure in the Legislature, arguing that the existing boards must be allowed to finish the million-dollar flood-protection projects that are under way.

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