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### **Levee board candidate list takes shape Panel has until Dec. 29 for list**

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By Sheila Grissett

East Jefferson bureau

The complex process of selecting 18 people to serve on Louisiana's new regional levee boards began last week when the nominating committee started combing through more than 100 applications.

Committee members have until Dec. 29 to give Gov. Kathleen Blanco a list of 28 qualified applicants. But the committee has set for itself the more ambitious goal of handing names to Blanco by Christmas Day, and Chairman Jay Lapeyre Jr. said he hopes to make it.

"We'll know a lot more in a week," Lapeyre said Friday after a grueling session in which committee members vetted the first 69 applicants to determine whether they meet basic state guidelines.

Blanco is to name members by Jan. 1 to two boards that will manage levee systems in six parishes, signaling the start of consolidation. Backers of continued local levee district rule fought the overhaul in the Legislature this year but lost to high-profile political support and a potent grass-roots campaign

led by New Orleans activists. Voters statewide amended the Louisiana Constitution on Sept. 30 to consolidate governance.

#### **134 names**

By the time the application period closed Thursday, Lapeyre said, the secretary of state's office had accepted paperwork from at least 134 people willing to serve on either the 11-member board for the area east of the Mississippi River or the seven-member board that will oversee levees on the west bank.

The number of applications stood in stark contrast to the 17 in hand just three weeks ago, when committee members and consolidation supporters said they were worried they wouldn't get enough interest to field a complete list of nominees for Blanco.

"We went from one type of problem to the other," Lapeyre said. "Now we need to skinny this down fast. Our challenge is to make sure that we fill out a board of highly qualified people of integrity."

Lapeyre said about a dozen of the initial applicants were eliminated promptly because, for the most part, they were in conflict with regulations that prohibit government employees, including academics at state universities, from serving on the regional boards.

#### **Specific guidelines**

Still, challenges remain.

The law requires a specific mix of engineers, scientists and water managers, other professionals with college degrees and 10 years' experience in their fields, and everyday folks who don't have to meet educational or work requirements.

"This is a very complicated process, a very difficult board to fill," Lapeyre said.

An added challenge is that an overwhelming number of the applicants live in Jefferson Parish or Orleans Parish, yet the boards can seat them only in limited numbers.

For example, the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East will have 11 commissioners to govern the East Jefferson, Lake Borgne Basin and Orleans levee districts, as well as the newly created St. Tammany and Tangipahoa levee districts. It also will oversee regional projects east of the Mississippi River in St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes. But only one member each can come from Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard, St. John, St. Tammany, St. Charles and Tangipahoa. The remaining four spots are set aside for people living elsewhere.

The west bank regional board will oversee the West Jefferson Levee District and the Algiers portion of New Orleans with two commissioners from each of its jurisdictions and three nonresidents.

In spite of the geographic specificity, Lapeyre said, it looks as though the nominating committee has the required number of applicants from all jurisdictions. That could change once the ethical overlay is added and the numbers begin to decline.

Lapeyre already knows some applicants will be eliminated or remove themselves from consideration, once they better understand some very strict state guidelines. Disqualifying factors include:

-- No board member or close relative can have interest in any entity that does business of any kind with the regional levee district, its subdistricts or any facilities that the board controls.

-- No elected officials or former elected officials, within 24 months of the termination of their terms, can serve on the boards.

-- No public employees or former public employees, within 12 months of the termination of their employment, can serve.

-- No person who has registered as a legislative lobbyist within two calendar years of the date of appointment can serve.

-- No person can serve while also seated on another board or commission that is appointed by any elected official or body of elected members.

-- Levee board members cannot support or oppose a political candidate or issue except by voting, nor become a member of any political committee or faction, nor solicit money on behalf of a candidate or party or help manage a campaign.

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