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Times-Picayune

Levee Board back to its bad old ways

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Author: Stephanie Grace

Opinion

Maybe it was all a dream. Perhaps it was a figment of my admittedly addled post-Katrina imagination. But I could swear a big, bold reform movement swept through Baton Rouge a few months back, and the Legislature reacted by approving a constitutional amendment to merge the area's levee boards and refocus the consolidated agencies' efforts on, of all things, levees.

I seem to remember a certain groundswell of outrage over how much time and energy the Orleans Levee Board, so often the poster child for bad behavior, has spent on other matters over the years. Things like water fountains and movie studios and floating casinos, not to mention fat cat contracts and the type of political shenanigans that give Louisiana a black eye.

I thought the message out of a reluctant Legislature overmatched by citizen activists and sympathetic pols such as Sen. Walter Boasso and, ultimately, Gov. Kathleen Blanco, was that this was all in the past -- that, assuming voters statewide concur when they go to the polls on Sept. 30 -- those days are over.

Yet to read the news out of the Orleans Levee Board, generally regarded as the most parochial and distracted of all its peers, it almost feels like nothing has changed.

Despite its most uncertain long-term prospects, the board has been busy fielding major development projects, including two in the neighborhood of \$200 million each. One promises 1,500 condo units in four or five high-rises as high as 40 stories tall, plus commercial space, a hotel, an indoor-outdoor water park and other entertainment venues. A second offers a luxury hotel built atop a barge, a 2,000 seat arena and waterfront townhomes. The first envisions the presence of a casino boat.

That's a complication, since the Belle of Orleans, which was docked at South Shore Harbor until Katrina, has set sail for St. Mary Parish. Further confusing the picture is the state gaming board's approval last week of the sale of two Lake Charles licenses that would force an operator to pay a \$50 million penalty to locate in Orleans Parish and compete against Harrah's, which -- surprise! -- happens to be the seller.

So what's the Levee Board doing? Of course, it's asking for the state's last unclaimed license.

Based on all this business as usual, it might seem that the levee board is ignoring its possibly looming extinction.

On second glance, it's clear that at least some board members have one eye on the calendar.

In fact, board member Eugene Green has suggested fast-tracking consideration of both projects, and one of the developers has admitted that he'd like to snag a lease before the board's vast holdings get folded into the state Division of Administration, assuming the amendment passes.

"Politically, we'd rather deal with Orleans Parish than a state board," said local developer Rickey Spearman, in a comment that kind of makes you wonder why.

Board President Mike McCrossen's stated explanation for all this maneuvering is that the board needs the money to stay afloat and keep the levees in decent condition. But in a few months, the finances may well be the state's problem, so it's hard to see the urgency.

And there are all sorts of reasons not to act with undue haste, starting with the fact that the city's neighborhood and overall planning process is incomplete. Also, the board's longtime real estate consultant has cautioned that an accelerated approval process would leave little time to prepare a properly-researched and thought-out request for proposals,

the traditional starting point for governments that want to offer land for development. And the City Planning Commission and City Council would also need to approve any such ambitious projects, which surely won't happen before the proposed January expiration of the local levee board.

Yet the Levee Board soldiers on, as if everything were as it was.

And with every new project it takes on, it helps make the case for its own demise.

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Stephanie Grace is a staff writer. She may be reached at (504) 826-3383 or at sgrace@timespicayune.com.

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