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### Levee board opposes cash swap

#### White House seeks to transfer funds

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By Sheila Grissett, East Jefferson bureau

Members of the newly consolidated east bank levee board wrestled all day Thursday with the fine points of a controversial White House/Army Corps of Engineers proposal to scramble the way \$1.3 billion appropriated for hurricane protection can be spent this fiscal year.

In the end, the East Louisiana Flood Protection Authority agreed to stand against the reallocation and to send a strongly worded message to Capitol Hill: Fully fund all projects so that the corps can do its job without having to ship money from one hurting area of the region to another.

"Nothing this board does is an attempt to diminish the needs of the West Bank," said Tom Jackson, president of the month-old "super board" now managing most of the levee districts east of the Mississippi River. "And we urge the White House and Congress to understand that this isn't something that needs to be played with."

Under the proposal included in the budget plan President Bush delivered to Congress on Monday, about half the targeted \$1.3 billion would be used to award new contracts to keep work going on the West Bank hurricane protection system when it runs out of money this spring.

The rest would go toward raising about 20 miles of levee in eastern New Orleans from Lakefront Airport to the CSX Railroad crossing near the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, and restoring 8.2 miles of seriously degraded levee between Verrett and Caernarvon in southern St. Bernard Parish.

But to use the money in those areas, it would have to be removed from accounts dedicated to other critical work, almost all of which is planned for the east bank, where the East Authority is charged with ensuring safe levees and adequate flood control.

The east bank projects include the armoring of levees and floodwalls against erosion, replacing deficient floodwalls, raising levees to protect against the so-called 100-year storm, and constructing permanent surge protection and pumping stations at three vulnerable New Orleans outfall canals.

The \$1.3 billion cannot be used on the east bank this fiscal year for a variety of reasons, corps officials contend, including the fact that final designs cannot be drawn until a corps-led team finishes complex computer modeling that will establish just how high levees and floodwalls have to be to defend against a 100-year-storm surge.

Because of that, corps commanders and the White House said the money should be used instead to continue vital projects on the West Bank, some already in progress but in danger of running out money and some that can't begin for lack of money.

"We actually have all the money we need this year to do what we need to do, we just don't have it in the right places," said Col. Jeffery Bedey, chief of the Hurricane Protection Office.

"We know that in the past it was a system in name only," said Lt. Col. Murray Starkel, corps deputy district commander in New Orleans, told the authority Thursday. "This is an opportunity to treat it as a system."

But at the end of the day, even though many of the levee board members said they'd like to see Congress give the corps the flexibility to move money around, a majority decided that if the president and Congress didn't replace the \$1.3 billion -- or delayed doing so -- the territory under their jurisdiction would be at greater risk from another storm.

Authority treasurer John Barry said he would continue to encourage members of Congress to give the corps flexibility to move money between projects.

"They have their hands almost totally tied," he said. "Everyone who has talked about corps reform for 75 years has said the same thing -- we need to look at water in an integrated way. But Congress doesn't budget that way, and that needs to change."

Shifting money between accounts wouldn't be necessary, he said, if the corps had all the money it needs to completely restore and improve the system, from finishing repairs to strengthening or raising every levee, floodwall, and gate to withstand the 100-year storm, which is the minimum level of protection FEMA requires to provide federal flood insurance.

Some \$6 billion in emergency money has been allocated since Katrina, but the appropriations were based on rough, early estimates, and changing circumstances have driven actual costs considerably higher.

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