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### *Times-Picayune*

#### **Levee boards getting serious Bike paths, parks don't control floods**

March 11, 2007

By Sheila Grissett, East Jefferson bureau

Local levee districts spent millions of dollars over the years to help provide the public with places to play, picnic, stroll, cycle and sun along Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River.

But these are no longer your father's levee districts, and they are officially out of the recreation business. Members of the consolidated Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, which took control of levee districts in East Jefferson, Orleans and St. Bernard parishes on Jan. 10, say construction and maintenance of bike paths, promenades, parks and any other green spaces not directly tied to flood control must be handled by other public agencies.

"We exist as a result of the public's dissatisfaction with levee districts focusing on things other than flood protection," said East Authority President Tom Jackson, a retired civil engineer. "We aren't against recreation, but we aren't the agency to provide it."

The agency is focused instead on keeping storm-crippled levee districts on their feet and in herding federal agencies to repair and improve pump stations, raise floodwalls and build surge-stopping gates throughout the Lake Pontchartrain Basin.

"But it's more than just a focus of flood control," Jackson said. "My understanding of the law creating this authority is that it prohibits us from doing anything else. And I've told my executive directors that they aren't to build recreational facilities."

#### **Batture on back burner**

In River Ridge, that means the authority won't be developing some 70 acres of batture that the East Jefferson Levee District and Jefferson Parish bought last year from George Maynard for \$1.6 million.

"To be honest, I don't know why we really have that and I haven't had time to look at it," Jackson said. "But we won't develop it (for) recreation."

Jackson said it might be possible to strike a deal letting Jefferson Parish develop the property. But with the 2007 hurricane season less than three months away, he said, the batture isn't an authority priority, he said.

For now, the levee district has posted "no trespassing" signs on the property to keep people off all but a narrow strip of grass at the levee base, Executive Director Fran Campbell said.

"The property is overgrown and has ponds, sinkholes, dangling limbs and broken glass," Campbell said. "Our police can't even get into those woods to patrol, and we don't want anyone, especially a child, to get hurt in there."

Losing access to the undeveloped batture is a shock to nearby residents who have used it as a neighborhood park for years.

"It's just so frustrating that the parish and levee board finally bought it and dedicated it in perpetuity for recreation, and now we can't even go down and watch the ships pass," said Dewey Scandurro, who lives on nearby Third Street.

Downriver, the East Authority is working with the state Division of Administration to rid the Orleans Levee District of its "nonflood" assets, which may include the green space and lakefront promenades.

Dismantling a fiefdom

Under state law establishing the East Authority and its counterpart on the West Bank, established just last month, local levee districts must rid themselves of all operations and costs not directly linked to flood control. Nowhere is that task more challenging than in New Orleans, where the levee district had amassed a fiefdom over the years.

Among those nonflood properties are Lakefront Airport, the South Shore Harbor and Orleans marinas and the Sen. Ted Hickey Bridge, all of which will be transferred to the state. The Orleans Levee District will continue to collect most of the revenue from the airport and marinas until they are repaired and become operational.

But classifying other areas, including several linear miles of lakefront green space dedicated to recreation and even the stepped seawall built in the 1930s, is more difficult.

"My position and the corps' position is that the seawall isn't a hurricane-protection feature," Jackson said.

South of the seawall is Lakeshore Drive and acres of park area.

"If the seawall is the starting point of flood protection, then where's the end point?" East Authority Treasurer Tim Doody asked. "We're working on an agreement with the Division of Administration and state Department of Transportation for someone else to take care of the roadway and someone else to take care of the green space."

"That would leave us only those things that are determined to be flood assets, and that makes a big difference to the levee district," Doody said.

Jackson said Orleans Levee District workers will continue to cut the grass and pick up garbage along the lakefront until a plan is finalized with the state.

But when it comes to hauling dirt and pouring asphalt, repairing shelters and boat launches, and building new amenities, Jackson said the levee districts no longer have that responsibility.

"The bike paths are wonderful recreational assets. We just can't provide them," Jackson said. "But that doesn't preclude others from providing them on our property so long as they have the proper permits from us."