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Levee boards take final bow Regional oversight begins in January

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By Sheila Grissett

East Jefferson bureau

Under the guiding hand and watchful eye of a state transition team, the commissioners of four local levee boards are preparing to conduct business a final time before their appointments expire Dec. 31.

State overseers will attend each meeting to ensure that the outgoing boards make all the decisions necessary -- and only those that are necessary -- to keep the levee districts functioning smoothly during the transition from local to regional governance in January.

The state has been monitoring operations of the Orleans, Lake Borgne Basin, East Jefferson and West Jefferson levee districts for weeks to ensure that they function properly and free of political pressure during their waning days, said Ed Preau Jr., an assistant secretary with the state Department of Transportation and Development.

From hirings, firings and promotions to requests for extraordinary purchases, all have required state approval. The districts could buy pencils without permission, but not new vehicles, said Preau, who heads the transition team established at the request of the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority.

"We're not suggesting that we thought anything would happen. But we wanted to ensure the public that there would be no kinfolk deals, no sweetheart deals, no retaliation," Preau said, the last a reference to the battle that played out after Hurricane Katrina between reformers who campaigned for regional management of levee districts and those who fought a losing effort to keep local control.

"There's some really dedicated employees of these levee districts who've been given a black eye they didn't deserve," Preau said. "The districts have been accused of a lot of things by a lot of people."

"Having these safeguards in place gives the public confidence that there are no improprieties, and it also protects the staffs by making sure there's no political pressure put on them to make decisions they wouldn't otherwise make," he said. "It provides a record that nobody can come back later and throw dirt at."

Delay becomes a virtue

The goal of state overseers has been not to make unnecessary purchases, issue new contracts, execute new policies or in any way obligate the future regional boards, Preau said. Spending for emergencies, such as replacement of a pump for the Lake Borgne district, was authorized, but not for routine equipment purchases.

"All the executive directors are being really conscientious. They were a little unhappy to begin with until they understood this was for their protection, too," he said. "Basically, we've been telling them, if something isn't needed immediately, defer action until the new boards are in place."

The East Jefferson Levee Board is scheduled to hold its last regular monthly meeting on Thursday. The Lake Borgne Basin Levee Board is to meet Tuesday, the West Jefferson Board on Dec. 20 and the Orleans Levee Board on Dec. 28.

"We'll be there for the meetings and have prepared lists for each district about what needs to be done," Preau said. Details range from the mundane to the critical, and are designed to ensure continuity in everything from employee health benefits to legal representation for lawsuits.

Federal mandate

The dissolution of local governing boards in favor of regional oversight fulfills a congressional mandate that the state consolidate levee operations in southeast Louisiana or forfeit millions of federal dollars earmarked to study how to best protect against catastrophic storms.

Two new authorities will manage the maintenance of flood- and hurricane-protection systems on both sides of the Mississippi River, ending the balkanized system of management that some critics say contributed to the failed patchwork of levees and floodwalls during Hurricane Katrina.

Although Gov. Kathleen Blanco will appoint the new commissioners as she did the old ones, a nominating committee of academicians, scientists and government activists will give the governor a slate of names from which to make her choices. Previously, local politicians asked the governor to appoint specific individuals.

The new boards must include engineers and scientists, whereas the old boards did not.

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 newly created districts in St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes. The Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West will govern the West Jefferson Levee District and the Algiers portion of New Orleans with seven commissioners.

Goal of continuity

The shift from local to regional management won't affect district employees and, if the transition is smooth enough, Preau said workers shouldn't be able to tell a difference.

"The boards will go away Dec. 31, but no employees will be laid off and the districts themselves remain intact," Preau said. "You'll still have an Orleans Levee District, an East Jefferson Levee District and a West Bank Levee District."

Preau said working out details of the transition, which includes identifying and addressing a raft of legal and bookkeeping issues, has proved to be complex task.

"If you look, you'll see that there's a lot of lawyers on the transition team, and there's a reason for that," he said.

Preau said the districts are being urged to pay all bills so outgoing commissioners can sign the checks before they leave office, in case the new boards are not seated by Jan. 1. If some sort of temporary team is needed during the first few days of January, Preau said that will be handled by the nominating committee.

"They promise us they'll have something if needed," he said. "The key will be to figure out how quickly we'll have the new boards seated."

The committee hopes to have a slate of nominees to Blanco by Dec. 25.

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Sheila Grissett may be reached at sgrissett@timespicayune.com or (504) 467-1746.