

Locals say corps must man flood protection

The maritime industry worries that without experts in charge, waterways will be gridlocked

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LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND industry representatives are warning of threats to public safety and commerce if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers does not assume control of key components of the New Orleans region's new flood protection system.

The \$15 billion system is nearly complete, but flood authorities on both sides of the Mississippi River say they lack the expertise to operate certain structures that double as maritime infrastructure. They include the massive Lake Borgne Surge Barrier, the Seabrook Sector Gate and the West Closure Complex.

Authorities are quick to note that a navigation mandate, regardless of ability to take it on, dilutes an exclusive mission to protect residents at all costs. Industry members say premature gate closings could threaten mariners and the flow of vital cargo.

"That floodgate is going to be closed at the first hint of a storm. We aren't going to have the ability, the maneuverability or the knowledge to take the navigation industry's concerns into play," said Susan Maclay, president of the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West. "That's clearly not our mission and not our problem."

Both sides of the issue recognize each other's concerns and agree that dual-purpose structures require delicate timing to balance conflicting priorities and that the corps is the only entity up to the task.

Federal regulations place the corps in charge of

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Not likely law will change

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maritime navigation throughout the country, but Congress required nonfederal agencies to cover all operations and maintenance when it provided \$14.7 billion for the new flood protection system after the damaging 2005 hurricane season.

Congress acted urgently, which resulted in “blanket” language that failed to consider all the functions of individual structures, said Garret Graves, director of the state’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority.

But the system was not designed in a protection-first vacuum, he noted, meaning parts of it are inherently navigational.

“If it were just up to the hurricane protection system, if that were the only reality we were dealing with, then we would just build a levee across the channel,” he said. “But because there is a national maritime transportation system, you have to build a lock or a floodgate.”

Putting locals at the helm of these features is “inappropriate,” Graves said. The only way to put the corps in charge is through federal legislation, but he sees dim prospects at the moment. Reauthorizing the Water Resources Development Act is one option, but the last attempt to do so failed in 2009.

The federal government is unlikely to take on an estimated \$4 million expense if it isn’t obligated to do so, Graves said.

Local corps officials declined an interview request, agreeing only to answer questions in writing. The corps will “utilize” the Seabrook and Lake Borgne gates in “an emergency during the 2012 hurricane season,” wrote Ken Holder, the corps’ New Orleans District spokesman. He indicated the corps is prepared to permanently take on the additional responsibilities if Congress authorizes it.

The maritime industry fears that singularly focused flood authorities will close floodgates when mariners are counting on them to remain open, thereby stranding them in perilous waters.

Stretches of the waterway approaching the Mississippi River are unsafe to stop along, especially where it merges with the Mississippi Sound between Pascagoula, Miss., and far eastern New Orleans, say barge industry representatives and company executives.

Vessels in this area encounter open-sea con-

ditions prone to dangerous surges. In the event of a storm, mariners need assurance they can reach the river, which offers more docking opportunities and access to higher ground.

Barges travel slowly and hurricane-season weather forecasts can shift dramatically in the time — sometimes days — it takes to transit between the last safe stopping point and the river.

Tim Doody, president of the East Bank flood authority, said he fears a vessel might be trapped in the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal behind closed gates. The canal’s floodwalls aren’t built to withstand the impact of “a barge getting blown by 80 mph winds,” he said.

“If the water inside that area reaches 7 or 8 feet, it can be driven into a floodwall and you’ve got a catastrophic failure,” Doody said.

The U.S. Coast Guard is working on new mooring and evacuation procedures within the canal, which should reduce the chance of such a catastrophe. But Mark Wright, vice president of the trade association American Waterways Operators, noted that barges often carry hazardous products that could threaten neighborhoods surrounding the canal in a worst-case scenario.

“If we have determinations made to shut floodgates before those mariners can get through, there is no place for them to go,” Wright said. “When you are

talking about serious cargos that, if not handled correctly, could do far more damage than any sort of flood or break in levee protection, trust me, that’s a problem.”

The maritime industry is also leery that overabundance of caution will choke traffic on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, cutting supply lines to refineries, power plants and other businesses that rely on daily shipments.

Karl Gonzales, president of the Greater New Orleans Barge Fleeting Association, said missing a day or two of shipments is manageable, but he fears it might take a week or more to reopen a closed gate. That could cause a prolonged refinery shutdown, he said.

Doody predicted that no resolution will occur until it’s too late.

“We are going to close it an inopportune time for a mariner, and somebody is going to say, ‘What a bunch of stupid idiots. Why are they taking care of it all?’” Doody said. “We aren’t stupid idiots. That’s just not our charge.”

Navigation control

Local authorities want the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to take over operations and maintenance on features of the region’s new flood protection system that double as maritime navigation infrastructure. Those features are:

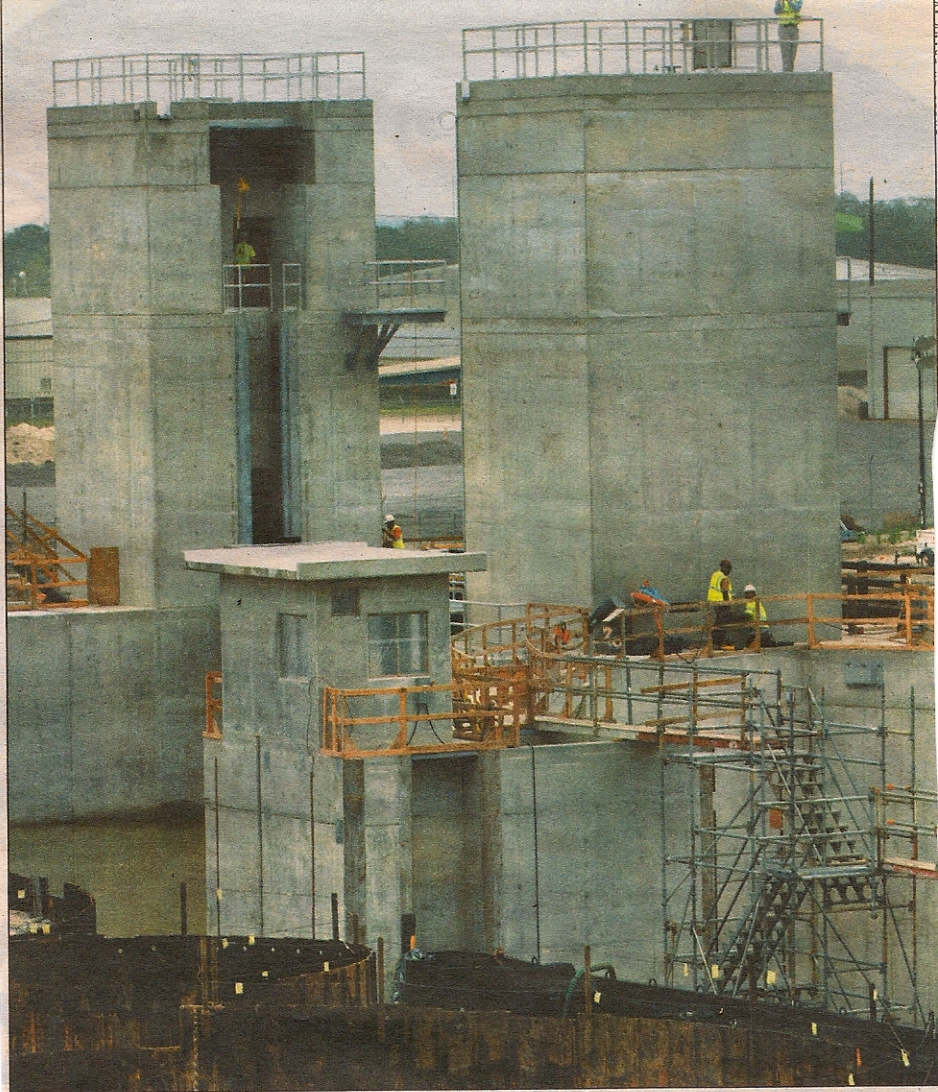
East Bank

Seabrook Sector Gate
Lake Borgne Surge Barrier

West Bank

West Closure Complex
Harvey Canal Floodgate

Source: CityBusiness staff research



Flood protection authorities in south Louisiana say they don't have the expertise to man facilities such as the Seabrook Sector Gate, which also controls maritime access.