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Gambit Weekly

COMMENTARY: Save the Seawall

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When Gov. Kathleen Blanco appointed the members of the new regional levee boards, she told them to concentrate on three priorities: flood control, flood control and flood control. It was a pithy sound bite, and it accurately reflected the public mood that led to the consolidation of local levee boards. But, as many noted in the debates leading up to the passage of Amendment 3 last September, the transition from many local levee boards to two regional boards was bound to present some difficulty. That's the nature of transitions. Consolidation proponents admitted during their campaign for Amendment 3 that many details would have to be worked out, and they promised to work with apprehensive lakefront residents and others toward that end. Chief among those details now is the task of dividing the assets of the Orleans Levee District into two classes -- those that relate directly to flood control and those that do not. That would seem to be an easy exercise. A marina, for example, is not a flood-control project. Nor is an airport. But other assets are not so easily defined. Case in point: the 5-mile-long parkway that runs along the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain from West End Boulevard to the Industrial Canal. On the surface, it's a recreation area. But beneath the shelter houses and playground equipment lie miles of dirt and fill that buttress lakefront levees from the constant pounding of the lake's waves. Without such a buffer, the levees that withstood Katrina would probably wash away in a few years, leaving the entire city vulnerable to flooding from the lake -- and not just during hurricanes.

One can understand that a brand-new board might conclude rather dismissively that a parkway serves no flood control purpose. There is room for debate on many "flood vs. non-flood" issues. One is at a loss, however, to explain how anyone could think that the 5-mile-long seawall that keeps the lakefront parkway in place and absorbs all the pounding of Lake Pontchartrain's waves is not an integral part of the city's flood-control system. Yet, to the disappointment of many, that is precisely the position initially taken by the leadership of the East Bank's new regional levee board.

That is an extremely ill-advised, even dangerous, position to take.

Fortunately, the commissioners of the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East (as the East Bank regional board is known) reversed themselves last week when they adopted their first official list of "flood-control" assets. Although the East Bank board is now on record as saying the stepped seawall is among the assets for which it should take responsibility, the board reached that conclusion reluctantly. Before last Thursday's meeting, the board's chairman repeatedly agreed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' long-held view that the seawall is not part of the area's flood protection system -- a view that is preposterous on its face.

All across southeast Louisiana right now, the Corps is "armoring" levees that failed during Katrina -- a function that the seawall has fulfilled superbly for the lakefront levees for more than 75 years. Moreover, construction of the seawall in 1930-31 was the very first "flood-control project" undertaken and completed by the original Orleans Levee District. Now, after countless hurricanes, seasonal storms and squalls, the fill beneath the seawall requires maintenance and repair. That will not come cheap.

Several sources close to the new East Bank levee board say the commissioners are concerned about the high cost of maintaining and repairing the seawall. If that's the case, the commissioners need to rethink their math as well as their engineering. If the seawall is declared by the federal government to be part of the flood-control system, the feds will pay at least 70 percent of the cost of repairing it. If not, all of those costs must be borne by local taxpayers -- the same folks the new board will need to convince to pay for other flood-control projects. That's one more reason why local and state officials have long stressed the seawall's flood-control relevance to the Corps of Engineers.

Why any levee commissioners would take the Corps' side on such an important issue is beyond comprehension. Lest we forget, the regional levee boards are supposed to advocate for local residents against the reluctance and incompetence of the Corps of Engineers -- not play the role of Corps lapdog. Let us also recall that the Corps of Engineers, which still denies that the seawall is an integral part of the local flood-control system, is the same outfit that (1) built the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, (2) told us that

the MR-GO would not destroy wetlands or increase flooding in Orleans and St. Bernard parishes, (3) long denied or ignored the importance of barrier islands and wetlands to flood protection and (4) designed and built the defective floodwalls along New Orleans' drainage canals -- the same floodwalls that failed during Katrina and flooded 80 percent of New Orleans.

This is not a "lakefront" issue. The seawall -- and, indeed, the parkway behind it as well -- protects the levees that protect all of New Orleans from lake flooding. We urge all citizens to lobby the new East Bank levee board as well as state and federal officials to have the seawall and the parkway declared integral parts of the local flood-control system. Such a designation will save us money and keep us safer.

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