



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Times-Picayune

Setting our sights on politics as usual

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Author: Stephanie Grace

Opinion

I wouldn't presume to know what more than 50,000 of my fellow citizens were thinking when they signed the Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans petition supporting a single levee board. I do, however, have a theory.

I figure that, in many cases, the fervent support that the novice activists tapped into wasn't about levee boards at all -- not exclusively, anyway. I have a pretty strong feeling that lots of people who signed their names were expressing a global frustration with politics-as-usual in New Orleans, and a desire to see small-minded and wasteful government relegated to the pre-Katrina era.

As the agency that spent way too much of its time managing a real estate empire, playing political games and relegating the annual inspection of the city's levees and floodwalls to little more than a pleasure outing before lunch, the soon-to-be-extinct Orleans

Levee Board certainly does exemplify the bad old ways.

But I don't believe the petition's signers were saying "enough is enough" to just the Levee Board. I think the deeper sentiment was "enough is enough, period."

And that brings us to the Louisiana Legislature.

Under intense pressure from the women of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, every good government group imaginable and Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who made consolidation the do-or-die issue of the just-completed special session, lawmakers overcame their basest instincts and passed a bill that goes a long way toward reforming the system. Good for them.

But on a host of reform measures aimed at New Orleans' other bloated, unnecessary fiefdoms, they came up way short.

A bill to merge New Orleans seven assessor offices into one died in a House committee -- thanks in large part to the shameless efforts of Rep. Jeff Arnold, son of one Orleans assessor, and Rep. Alex Heaton, brother of another.

Lawmakers also shrugged off proposals to merge civil and criminal court clerk and sheriff's offices in time for the April election, ensuring that reform can't happen for another four years. Same for efforts to consolidate the city's many court systems and obscure offices handling notarial archives, conveyances and mortgages.

In fact, just one merger bill made it to either the full House or Senate for a vote.

To hear the many New Orleans legislators who fought the mergers tell it, eliminating cushy, duplicative government jobs in an era of hurricane-mandated austerity is somehow an attack on the people of the city.

"Why are we picking on Orleans? Is it because a lot of citizens aren't there?" asked state Rep. Arthur Morrell. "It's getting to the point where New Orleans is down, and you want to kick it."

And then there was this gem from Heaton: "It wouldn't be the true New Orleans" with just one assessor.

That's akin to arguing that it wouldn't be New Orleans without lousy schools and rampant crime, other pre-K vestiges that nobody much misses. We're not talking about Jazzfest and Victorian architecture here.

In fact, many would argue that streamlining New Orleans government is a way to help, not hurt, the city. I'm guessing that plenty of people who signed the levee board petition

are in that camp.

And that means that, if legislators think they dodged a bullet by grudgingly supporting levee board reform, there will be plenty more bullets during the coming regular session, when Blanco and other reform supporters vow to attack New Orleans government again.

In fact, one of the silver linings to Katrina's big, black cloud has been an explosion of civic engagement. The levee board ladies, with one very big notch on their new belts, are just the most visible representatives of what could turn into a genuine, long- term movement.

So be warned, all you legislators. If my theory holds, this is far from over.

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Stephanie Grace is a staff writer. She may be reached at (504) 826-3383 or at sgrace@timespicayune.com.

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