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Advocate - Baton Rouge, La.

Voters speak loudly on levees * Blanco faced with naming boards**

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Naming two new boards to manage flood and hurricane protection in southeast Louisiana is next on the agenda after voters on Saturday resoundingly approved a plan to overhaul levee oversight after Hurricane Katrina.

The proposal, Constitutional Amendment No. 3, won approval from 81 percent of voters compared with 19 percent who voted against it.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who backed the measure, said overwhelming voter support for the amendment showed voters are in no mood for business as usual.

"People really care about basic reform in Louisiana," Blanco said.

The levee plan was one of 13 constitutional amendments on the ballot Saturday. All the amendments appeared to pass, according to unofficial returns.

About 22 percent of Louisiana's 2.9 million registered voters made it to the polls Saturday.

Constitutional Amendments Nos. 1, 2 and 3, which passed by about 4-to-1 margins, are designed to improve coastal protection after last year's deadly hurricane season.

The vote means that long-criticized levee boards in Orleans Parish and elsewhere will go out of business on Jan. 1.

In their place will be two new regional boards, with a huge difference in makeup from the previous levee boards, to regulate levees in the New Orleans area and nearby parishes.

The new setup is called the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority.

An 11-member panel will regulate levees and flood and hurricane protection in all or parts of seven parishes east of the Mississippi River. It will be called the east bank of the authority.

The other board, this one with seven members, will oversee storm protection in two parishes west of the river. It will be called the west bank of the authority.

Both will be under the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, which will be the single state panel sought by the federal government to oversee construction, operation and maintenance of hurricane, storm damage reduction and flood control projects.

The next step is for Blanco and the Secretary of State's Office to kick off the process of naming the two panels, said Sen. Walter Boasso, R-Arabi, and chief legislative sponsor of the proposal.

"Everybody is expecting to have this handled by Jan. 1 because there won't be any levee boards by that time," Boasso said.

Blanco agreed.

"We need to identify people that do not have conflicts of interest and who would be available to serve," she said in an interview with reporters on Saturday night.

The 11-member east-bank group will have to include five engineers or other professionals from related groups, three professionals from other areas and three at-large members.

It will oversee most of the Orleans Levee District, East Jefferson, St. Bernard; the newly created St. Tammany and Tangipahoa levee districts and parts of St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes.

The seven-member west bank group will include three engineers or others from related fields; two professionals from other areas and two at-large members. It will regulate the

West Jefferson levee district and parts of the Orleans Levee district that are west of the Mississippi River.

Ruthie Frierson is chairwoman of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, which backed the levee measure and played a key role in getting it through the Legislature earlier this year.

Boasso said Frierson's group deserves credit.

"They were relentless," he said.

One of the big benefits of the new system, Frierson said, will be better boards to oversee levees.

"The boards will consist of people who have experience in engineering backgrounds, hydrology, geology and other relevant fields," she said. "They will be making decisions on levee safety, not politics."

Voters also approved Constitutional Amendment No. 1 by a margin of 82 percent in favor to 18 percent against. It authorizes the use of oil and gas revenue for coastal restoration, hurricane protection and structures affected by wetland losses.

The state collects about \$30 million a year. However, Louisiana's congressional delegation is trying to win approval for federal legislation that would boost that aid as high as \$2 billion per year.

A bid to work out a compromise on Congress was delayed last week, hurting chances for an agreement this year.

"I am extremely worried," Blanco said.

Voters also approved Constitutional Amendment No. 2 by a margin of 79 percent in favor and 21 percent against. It would funnel new state funds into coastal restoration efforts.

The source of the money would be the state's share of a national tobacco lawsuit settlement. States sued tobacco firms in the 1990s over the costs of medical treatment for smoking-related illnesses.

Louisiana has already sold 60 percent of its share of future payments for \$4.6 billion. The amendment approved Saturday says that, if the rest is sold, half of the proceeds - an estimated \$200 million - would go to coastal restoration.

"That will really gives us a great little jumpstart as we move forward with this comprehensive plan," said Sidney Coffee, Blanco's executive assistant for coastal activities.

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