



April 18, 2007

A Reworked New Orleans Panel Adopts a Get-Tough Attitude on Levee Repairs

By [JOHN SCHWARTZ](#)

NEW ORLEANS — After years as a symbol of government sloth and corruption, the levee board here, newly revamped, is flexing its muscle and pushing the [Army Corps of Engineers](#) to prepare the city better for the next big storm.

Board members are talking tough with the corps about speeding up work to repair canals and pumping stations. They are demanding that areas of the levee system be fortified now instead of waiting for a long-term hurricane protection plan. And they are dumping past projects and programs not directly related to helping the city resist another calamity.

“We’re in a honeymoon period,” said Timothy P. Doody, a member of the board from St. Bernard Parish. “If we’re going to get anything done, now’s the time.”

In most river towns, it would not be a surprise to see levee board members doing their jobs, which are often vital to a region’s physical security. But in years past, before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hammered the region, the New Orleans board was criticized by local residents as corrupt, ineffective and overly focused on a multimillion-dollar Mardi Gras fountain and a casino.

The board’s levee inspections were largely ceremonial twice-a-year drives around the levee system with the corps, followed by an expensive lunch. And even though the New Orleans area needed a unified system of storm protection, levee governance was fragmented among the parish-level boards.

After the storms, the Legislature passed a constitutional amendment consolidating many of the New Orleans-area boards into just two regional boards. The law required that members, who are appointed by the governor, have expertise in fields like engineering, hydrology, geology and law.

“It’s a real step forward,” said G. Wayne Clough, president of the [Georgia Institute of Technology](#) and the head of a [National Research Council](#) committee evaluating the corps investigation of the levee breaches. Dr. Clough said the improved levee board, along with a still-needed external oversight organization to ensure that the corps rebuilds the hurricane protection system well, were essential elements of a safer New Orleans.

Thomas L. Jackson, the president of one of the boards, the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, is a retired engineer and a former president of the American Society of Civil Engineers. A native of Metairie, Mr. Jackson is also a member of an outside group of experts called on by the corps investigation.

He is one of five engineers on the board now. And board members will learn even more at a three-day “levee school” this summer planned by Louisiana State University that will cover topics like levee maintenance and wetlands restoration.

The expertise is not solely technical, however. The secretary of the board, John M. Barry, is the [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning author of “*Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*,” (Simon & Schuster, 1998). Col. Jeffrey A. Bedey, commander of the corps’ Hurricane Protection Office in New Orleans, keeps a copy of the book on his desk.

“I made it mandatory reading” for senior staff members, Colonel Bedey said, adding that having a unified board with such depth was a “great opportunity.”

The second New Orleans-area board created by the constitutional amendment, the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West Bank, largely represents the communities on the west bank of the Mississippi. The East board has already shown some muscle — and heat. At a meeting in March concerning conditions in St. Bernard Parish, just east of New Orleans, Mr. Jackson expressed anger over drainage canals that had not been cleared of debris by the corps and pumps that push rainwater into the canals still running at greatly reduced capacity.

“It’s, in my mind, appalling” to have so much undone so long after the storm, he said.

At the St. Bernard meeting, members and local citizens demanded action on stretches of levee along waterways like the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal that are still lower than the rest of the system. Low spots can overflow in high water and become the next devastating breaches.

The corps had planned to fix this problem — which Colonel Bedey says “keeps me up nights” — as it has fixed smaller drainage canals: by putting gates in place to block surges and keep the lower segments from being tested. The new gates would not be complete until 2010.

But after strong urging by the board in the St. Bernard meeting and subsequent sessions, the corps has agreed to look at ways to speed the process with measures like temporary gates or quick patches.

The challenges ahead are daunting; so much is still in ruins. The St. Bernard Parish meeting was held in a trailer behind the ruined parish government offices; the parish president, Henry Rodriguez Jr., is still living in a trailer at the complex.

The new board is also working under the heavy weight of the old boards’ obligations, including a \$20 million legal judgment against the Orleans Levee District, which led a federal district judge in March to begin proceedings that could lead to seizure of the new board’s assets.

Then there are the other obligations, which the board calls “nonflood assets,” that accumulated over time, including parks and bike paths along Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi that the old board built and maintained and which the new board wants to hand off to other agencies.

“We’re spending an enormous amount of time separating flood assets from nonflood assets,” Mr. Barry, the board secretary, said. He declined to criticize the old board’s decision to build businesses like casinos,

however, since well-run businesses “can create revenue and help you operate.”

But, he added, “The question is, what do you spend your time on?” The new board, he said, is “interested in levees.”

Some elements of the old Orleans board’s legacy are more troubling. The old board fought plans by the corps to erect floodgates at the mouths of the drainage canals, lobbying Congress instead to order the corps to raise the levees along the canals. Now that canal floodwall failures have devastated the city, the corps has built the gates and pumps it originally wanted, at great expense and at a pace that led to nagging problems with the new pumps.

Bruce Feingerts, a New Orleans lawyer who represented the Orleans levee board in its fight against the corps in the 1980s, defended the old board by arguing that it was not originally configured to be made up of experts, but to be the money men who lined up the local share of the costs.

The early plan for gates caused worries that they might be expensive to maintain and might not work as well as simply building higher levees. The corps, when rebuffed on the gates plan, did not argue that the backup plan to build floodwalls would be less safe.

“The levee board greatly looked to the Corps of Engineers for expertise,” Mr. Feingerts said.

The new board members know that, as with all good-government initiatives, theirs could find itself mired and accomplish little. Mr. Barry said the board’s long-term influence over the city’s future was unclear.

“We may discover that we don’t have nearly as much power as we hope that we have,” he said, adding, “One thing that is not going to happen is, we’re not going to lose our focus.”

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