

## **Failure of levee merger sparks outrage - Supporters say they won't let issue drop**

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**"Obstructionist" state lawmakers are jeopardizing billions of dollars in federal aid for flood protection by preserving an antiquated, patronage-laden system of levee boards, members of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission charged Monday.**

**In a series of firmly worded commentaries, Nagin's appointees lashed out against lawmakers who, in the special session that ends today, refused to support efforts to consolidate New Orleans area levee boards.**

**"We need to name names of who are the obstructionists and call them out on this issue," said commission leader and Tulane University President Scott Cowen, who called for an aggressive campaign against state senators who voted to water down the levee board legislation and state representatives who rejected the plan out of hand.**

**"While our outrage is well-placed, we have to raise the level of action. I say we put a full court press on this," he said.**

**City Councilman Oliver Thomas, the lone representative of the city's legislative branch on Nagin's commission, said congressional leaders in Washington, D.C., are watching closely to see how Louisiana helps itself in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster.**

**Thomas said the failure of the levee board initiative sends the wrong message. "This was our first major step," he said, urging citizens to let lawmakers know "that this is unacceptable."**

**Speaking directly to a crowd of more than 200 in a downtown Sheraton Hotel ballroom, Thomas told those in attendance to get on the phone and call their legislators. "This is the big one," he said. "We need you."**

**Regional Transit Authority Chairman Jimmy Reiss said Sunday's 51-38 vote by the House to scuttle the consolidation proposal was "nothing more than business as usual."**

**He said the Legislature's failure to act leaves Louisiana with a "dysfunctional" system of levee protection that provides "no consolidated plan" for defense against Category 3, 4 or 5 hurricanes.**

**Calling on local residents to express their collective disgust to individual legislators, Reiss said: "Tell them you're fed up. Tell them it's time to put aside patronage politics and personal gain."**

**Backed by strong support from the business community, state Sen. Walter Boasso, R-Arabi, entered the first post-Katrina session of the Legislature hoping to consolidate the levee boards for Orleans, St. Bernard and St. Tammany parishes and East Jefferson. While the measure would have kept the levee taxing districts intact, it would have put flood control for those districts under the authority of a new regional board.**

**Boasso's bill limped out of a Senate committee last week, exempting the Orleans and West Jefferson levee districts from its provisions. Then on Friday, Sen. Francis Heitmeier, D-Algiers, got Boasso and the Senate to accept an amendment that lets the Orleans Levee Board**

**retain a large amount of its autonomy over nonflood-control issues, including oversight of the Lakefront Airport and real estate developments.**

**On Sunday, Rep. Kenneth Odinet, D-Arabi, employed a parliamentary procedure that prevented further debate, effectively killing the Boasso proposal for this session.**

**Odinet, whose St. Bernard Parish district was devastated by Katrina, argued that local authorities know better how to perform maintenance and make recommendations about flood-control infrastructure, and that local boards can better ensure that the community is not shortchanged.**

**A pair of bills sponsored by Gov. Kathleen Blanco to create a statewide flood-control and coastal restoration authority were approved by the Senate Monday and now await Blanco's signature.**

**Members of Nagin's commission said they have little faith in the Blanco plan, which does not consolidate any levee boards but simply provides oversight of the boards.**

**Unless the initiative "is given some teeth," Reiss said the governor's plan "is nothing more than just another layer of bureaucracy."**

**At the urging of real estate developer Joe Canizaro, the Nagin commission unanimously approved a motion to do all it can to keep alive discussion of levee board consolidation before the Legislature convenes its next post-Katrina special session in January.**

**"We need to express our outrage that true reform was sought, but politics-as-usual has once again gotten in the way," said Mel Lagarde, the commission's co-chairman.**

**Nagin and business leaders backed Boasso's bill because they saw it as an important overhaul measure of the fragmented levee governing system in the New Orleans area. Some business people even considered the bill a litmus test of whether Louisiana was, in their opinion, prepared for true reform of its political patronage practices.**

**Jay Lapeyre Jr., president of the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region, said Monday that the group was disappointed that the Legislature did not give a hearing for an initiative that deals with "what is clearly the most important problem this community faces."**

**The House vote was an example of "deal-making by the political elite" that put patronage in front of public safety, Lapeyre said.**

**Lapeyre said the vote sent a negative signal, but he is hopeful that eventually the council's recommendations will prevail because the group received such a strong response to its message of reform.**

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