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# Nomination for Katrina breach sites sparks debate

By KEVIN MCGILL, ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW ORLEANS — A push to place levee breach sites from Hurricane Katrina on the National Register of Historic Places is cause for consternation at the federal agency that built the floodwalls that failed during the 2005 storm.

It's a potentially sensitive issue for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has been asked to OK the effort. Nobody denies the resulting floods caused death, destruction and misery on a historic scale, but there's concern over whether the application could influence ongoing court cases about the corps' responsibility and liability in the floods.

"We would like to re-emphasize that the narrative needs to be carefully reviewed and edited to make sure that personal opinions and any contested facts are really not presented as fact," Corps official Mike Swanda told the state review board during a December meeting, according to a transcript.

Also, corps spokesman Ken Holder said, the agency wants to be sure the listing wouldn't prohibit "any kind of future levee lift or anything that would protect the safety of the public." One reason for including a property on the register is to make sure consideration of a property's historic value is considered before it is demolished or altered.

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Mark Barnes, a consultant for the group seeking the historic designation called Levees.Org, said there is no need to worry. Placement on the register wouldn't preclude alterations necessary for public safety, he said in an interview. Moreover, federal agencies already are required to research and consider historic and archaeological effects of planned projects before they are undertaken - a costly endeavor that has already been undertaken by Levees.Org. "It's going to save the corps a lot of money because they won't have to go through this whole process," Barnes said.

The final decision rests with National Park Service, not the corps. But the corps, as the owner of one of the sites, gets to weigh in.

Levee breaches at numerous sites in and around New Orleans flooded 80 percent of New Orleans and also swamped suburban areas. Flood water lifted some houses off foundations, flooded others at or above roof lines. Close to 2,000 deaths were blamed on the storm, many due to drowning. Stories and pictures of the tens of thousands of people stranded in both the Morial Convention Center and the storm-damaged Louisiana Superdome - sweltering in late summer heat with no electricity and little food or water - dominated media for days.

Afterward, Levees.Org emerged as a major critic of the corps and an Internet megaphone for the view that Katrina was more of a man-made disaster, due to faulty design and construction of floodwalls and levees, than a natural or

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Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, better known

Lower 9th Ward. That site is owned by the corps, which is why the Levees.Org application to have the sites listed had to go to the Corps' Federal Preservation Officer, who will decide whether to send it on to national register officials with the Park Service.

“The FPO is the one who decides whether the property is eligible for listing and decides whether to forward it,” said Jim Gabbert, a historian with the National Parks Service. “If in the FPO’s opinion, the property does not meet the criteria for listing, then the FPO does not have to submit the nomination.”

But, if the corps does not submit the nomination, Gabbert and others familiar with the process say, Levees.Org can apply directly to the Park Service’s keeper of the Register.

Applying for National Register status has been a long and complex process resulting in a 39-page application that reads in part like a history of drainage and flood protection in New Orleans and in part like a technical manual. It went through a review by a state panel on preservation issues in December, and was actually voted down 6-3. Some members worried aloud that because the sites have been repaired and altered since the breach, they no longer qualify for the register. At least one said the document was so detailed and complex that it amounted to “overkill.”

But State Preservation Officer Pam Breaux overruled the panel. “Although the document may not be perfect, we believe the significance of the resources and the lessons learned from the event (as outlined in the nomination) justify proceeding with the National Register listing process,” she said in a document sent to the Park Service.

A final determination is still months away. The corps’ preservation officer has 60 days from the time the nomination is received - and it had not yet been received as of Friday - to act on it. The corps could ask for changes, which could extend the process. Once the nomination reaches the Park Service, whether through the corps or not, there would be a 45 day public comment period before the site could be registered.

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