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Point of View

Travel a small price to pay for levee oversight

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State Sen. J.P. Morrell has signaled to Gov. Bobby Jindal that he will vote against reappointing two commissioners to the new flood authorities formed post-Katrina, citing the high cost of the flood experts' monthly commutes to attend board meetings.

Ricardo Pineda, commissioner and flood expert for the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, incurred travel expenses of about \$20,000 for 2009 and 2010 to commute to and from California. Dr. Johannes Westerink, commissioner and hydrologist for the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West, incurred travel expenses of about \$5,000 per year to commute from Indiana.

The two regional flood authorities, both created after Hurricane Katrina, were put in place so that the Army Corps of Engineers, the agency charged by Congress since 1965 to design and build the region's hurricane protection, could work with two local sponsors instead of nearly a dozen.

The flood authorities are required to include hydrologists, engineers, civil engineers and other professionals and are supposed to hold the corps' feet to the fire and assure that a disaster like the one that occurred during Katrina would not happen again.

The flood authorities are intended as a good governance model. Members are not politically appointed and are not compensated for their service. Only one member of the levee board can reside in each of the represented parishes. These restrictions and others produce a truly regional board largely free of political pressure.

Since 2005, Congress has released \$15 billion for repair and improvement to the region's failed hurricane protection system. But Congress also inserted language into the 3rd Supplemental Public Law 109-148 requiring the establishment of "a single state or quasi-state entity to act as local sponsor for construction, operation and maintenance of all of the hurricane, storm damage reduction and flood control projects in the greater New Orleans and southeast Louisiana area..."

This was required because some members of Congress were reluctant to release federal funds to Louisiana because they were convinced the money would fall down a black hole. It is possible that they did not understand that contracts for both designing and constructing the hurricane protection system are controlled by the Army Corps of Engineers -- and that the contracts the local levee boards controlled were for non-flood assets.

It is well established that the pre-Katrina levee boards were not exactly models of good governance and that appointees often knew little to nothing about hurricane protection. But as observed by Dan Hitchings, director of Task Force Hope for the corps in February 2006, the local levee boards did nothing significantly wrong in the levee and floodwall failures.

After seeing the need to monitor the actions of the corps, then-Sen. Walter Boasso of St. Bernard Parish, the New Orleans Business Council and Citizens for One Greater New Orleans combined their efforts to craft the new authority legislation and garner Louisiana support for it. But there were no models to follow since no other similar levee entity existed in the entire country.

"I made it up, said Boasso. "There was no state model that we had taken this from."

The 2006 campaign to create a technically competent regional authority to watch over the corps was called levee board reform, a moniker which may have implied that the historic levee boards were somehow responsible for the deadly flooding. When we reference the 2006 campaign, we prefer to call it levee board empowerment, and it is indeed quite an accomplishment.

Creation of the two local superboards and empowering them with non-political experts has now become a model for the United States. California followed suit and in 2006, voted on a historic package of flood bills that required professional backgrounds of its board members, as Louisiana had done.

Perhaps allowing commissioners like Mr. Pineda and Westerink who reside out of state to vote via skype or conference call could save taxpayers some funds. But Mr. Pineda's and Mr. Westerink's travel expenses may be a small price to pay to remove the appearance and opportunity for corruption and help assure the \$15 billion that Congress approved gets spent wisely.

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