

Hurricane Katrina levees: Group wants places where levees failed added to national register

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An Oct. 10, 2005, photo shows damage in the aftermath of the failure of New Orleans levees after Hurricane Katrina. A nonprofit group has hired an expert as it works to have the places where the levees failed named to the National Register of Historic Places. (Photo by Francis James)

NEW ORLEANS — A nonprofit advocacy group has hired a retired federal expert for help in its quest to have two spots where flood walls gave way during Hurricane Katrina added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Levees.org announced its effort to put the locations on the National Register back in August. Organization founder Sandy Rosenthal said last week that Mark R. Barnes, an archaeologist who is retired from the National Parks Service and is now an associate professor at Georgia State University, has been retained to help guide them through the application effort.

Barnes said in an interview he is confident of approval, although it is still months away. A state panel that is a key part of the process

may consider the application in April.

"I think generally people at the national level, at the state level, at the local level, realize the importance of these levee breach sites, that these are probably two of the most significant," Barnes said. "And I, am pretty confident, having worked with the Parks Service for over 35 years and having been the first archaeologist with the National Register."

One site is where a major break in the wall along the Industrial Canal broke, contributing to flooding of the Lower 9th Ward; the other, a similar break in the wall that was supposed to protect the Lakeview area from the 17th Street Canal. Both neighborhoods were among the worst hit, with floods that filled homes to roof tops and pushed some buildings off their foundations. Floodwaters covered 80 percent of the city after the Aug. 29, 2005, storm.

The register is the federal government's list of properties it considers worthy of preservation and recognition. The

process of receiving recognition can be long and difficult, and sites typically must be 50 years old, though exceptions are made.

"There is, what they call generally, a 50-year rule, but it's a rule that they tend to modify if something is of importance as a historic event," Barnes said.

The Katrina breaches, which led to flooding that killed hundreds and all but wiped out parts of the New Orleans area, would certainly qualify, Barnes said.

Barnes said placement on the National Register is significant for two reasons: One, it is official federal recognition of the historical importance of a place; two, it requires the gathering of data on the sites that other federal or federally licensed agencies would have to gather before doing any work on the sites.

"I think a lot of times it's looked upon, unfortunately, as this is a way of stopping progress. It's not, It's something that's going to have to be done anyway," Barnes said.

Associated Press Writer Kevin McGill authored this report.