

Thursday, May 11<sup>h</sup>, 2006  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

### HURRICANE EVACUATION PLANS QUESTIONABLE

(Jim's column last week appeared in over 50 Louisiana newspapers)

Less than three weeks. June 1<sup>st</sup>. It's almost here. Hurricane season again. Is Louisiana ready? You be the judge.

First of all, we've been told by reliable sources that New Orleans' levees are prepared for no more than a Category 2 storm, and that the repairs being done to the levee system throughout this area contain major flaws and could well fail again. That's from Ivor Van Heerden, who has been a source of intelligent analysis from the LSU Hurricane Center. Bottom line, the levee system may not handle any major hits.

Second of all, you almost wonder whether or not the recently released evacuation plan from the City of New Orleans was some sarcastic joke. Simply put, the plan says: "Get out – leave. Head for higher ground. Hit the road."

The Mayor Nagin Plan does call for public transportation to be made available with city bus drivers supposedly on call to transport those in need out of the city. Words of wisdom from the city's Regional Transit Authority, through spokesman Rosalind Blanco Cook, gives us assurances that bus drivers are "required to stay on the job by the terms of their contract." So now here's the situation. You have a bus driver with the same concerns to evacuate for his family and himself that faces everyone else in New Orleans. He can either get his family out of harm's way, or he can go stand by his bus. Realistically, how many bus drivers are going to stick around? It's short sighted to say the least.

The question still has not been answered as to whether the National Guard was immediately on the move post-Katrina, and whether or not contingency plans has been made to have them available this time around. Has there been any advance planning for the National Guard to be called in to drive the buses? If so, the public has no knowledge of such action.

I related in an earlier column an incident where I personally faced a New Orleans bus crisis back in the early 1980s. Bus drivers were about to go on strike under very tense circumstances. Then Mayor Dutch Morial had contacted then Governor Dave Treen to call out the National Guard if there was a need to drive the buses. Both the Governor and Lieutenant-Governor were going to be out of the country when the contract deadline was up. That put me in the catbird seat of being acting Governor.

The National Guard was put on alert 48 hours before the deadline, and guardsmen knew, on short notice, they would be required to come to New Orleans and drive public buses. That was their job. It was very clear well in advance.

Right now, we don't really know what plan, if any, is in place. New Orleans has its plan that was announced without any consultation with surrounding parishes, including the City of Baton Rouge and the State. It's obvious, as has been the case from the first day post-Katrina, that there is a major coordination problem south of I-10.

How about the State plan? Once an evacuee is told to "get out" by the city, where do you go? Well, the State wants to keep it a secret. First of all, families who might have to evacuate are now being told by State officials that there will be no shelters south of Interstate 10 that includes three of the State's major cities along the Interstate: Baton Rouge, Lafayette, and Lake Charles. So evacuees are required to push on north in bumper-to-bumper traffic. What's the destination? Again, it's a secret. Social Services Secretary Ann Williamson announced this past week that Louisiana will not publish a list of shelters ahead of time "because leaders worry it would hinder the evacuation process, not help it." Instead, there will be shelter information points, or checkpoints, set up along the Interstates and major highways.

So you have no idea where to go, and you just hope you don't miss the sign on the Interstate, in what could be blinding rain and wind at night, in the hope of finding some shelter. Hold on, now. I'm really not making this up. That's exactly the plan.

There are thousands of families that will be forced to evacuate who have an ultimate destination. It may be with relatives or friends somewhere in north Louisiana, Mississippi or the surrounding area. Knowing how to plan to head for a designated shelter in advance would seem to be imperative so that a family could estimate time of arrival, plan for food and bathroom stops, knowing that driving conditions are going to be about as bad as you can get. Throw into this mix the fact that the State won't give you any idea where you might end up, and there would seem to be a recipe for massive traffic jams, and a great deal of misery for hundreds of thousands of those trying to flee the potential hurricane at their heels.

Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden expressed his frustration this week at the lack of any published detailed plan. "Why aren't we talking about what else needs to be done from a State level to a local level so we don't pile more people in Baton Rouge?" said Holden.

Here's another question. Has there been a "walk through" with public officials at every level testing the system that is supposed to be in place? We do this in our private lives all the time. I took my four-year-old granddaughter to preschool for her first day of class. What was the first thing we did when we got there? We had a discussion and a fire drill as to how to get out of the building. On a recent family cruise off the Atlantic coast, the first thing we did upon arriving on board was to have a full discussion of evacuation plans. In our private lives and our business, we do this all the time.

And has any consideration been given to use of the private sector? While both Louisiana State Government and Washington sat around for days worrying about who was in charge, major companies were offering to help. Wal-mart had a large inventory of supplies that could have been put to use more quickly if plans had been put into place. My brother-in-law, the Sheriff of Plaquemines Parish, called several days post-Katrina to say that he and his deputies had not had clean clothes since the flooding began. A quick trip to Wal-mart produced several hundred pair

of underwear, t-shirts, shorts, etc. Most Wal-mart stores were open right after the storm. FedEx? They indicated they could have 150 planes ready the next day to bring in supplies. Is this part of the State's plan? Have these folks been contacted? If not, why not?

Here's hoping that the Governor and other key officials have done a "run through" on a given weekend to handle the "what if" scenario. Our National Guard serves a weekend a month, 12 months out of the year. I'm just hoping that some higher up has sent out a distress signal where everyone goes to their flood battle stations on very short notice, and goes through the procedures. Heck, give the National Guardsmen a few hours notice, and see how quickly they get in their humvees and make it to New Orleans to the exact location where the buses are stored for the weekend. Who among us can forget the chilling picture of hundreds of buses with water up to the windows because they weren't put into use?

Our military does "fail-safe" drills all the time in simulated warfare. How about a simulated hurricane exercise where hundreds of State and local officials are called out to their duty stations, to see if the plan works? It just makes common sense.

Has it been done? I sure hope so. Would I bet on it? I might have done better taking the odds on High Limit (45-1) in last week's Kentucky Derby. If you didn't follow the race, he finished last.

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Did you join the throngs of U.S. citizens who raised up in arms over the singing of the Star Spangled Banner in Spanish? Were you offended to hear the national anthem in a different language?

Two observations. First of all, many folks need to look in the mirror. Did you know that 61 percent of Americans don't even know the words to the Star Spangled Banner in English? Another thought, our problem might not be the Star Spangled Banner in Spanish. The real problem may be that Americans speak no other languages at all. Globalization is spreading like wildfire, the Chinese are making a major economic assault worldwide, and yet there's not a high school in Louisiana that teaches the Chinese language. Maybe that's something to get upset about.

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Now bear with me. I'm about to end this weekly tirade. But please, just one more observation. Remember the immortal words of talk show host Rush Limbaugh who pounded drug users time and time again? "What this says to me is that too many whites are getting away with drug use. The answer is to go out and find the ones who are getting away with it, convict them and send them up the river, too." So now we find out that he cuts a deal on his recent drug charges to "get some help." It looks like the wealthy and influential go to rehab, while the poor and powerless go to prison. It brings back the saying we've all heard before that a liberal is a conservative who has been arrested.

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*“If we had eggs, we could have some ham and eggs, if we had some ham.”*  
- Don Imus

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Peace and justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown’s weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim’s Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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