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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Levee Boards. Who Needs Them?

Now let me get this straight. As part of levee board reform, the Louisiana Legislature, with the Governor's blessing, will split the oversight of flood protection in New Orleans between two levee boards with a third board over these two boards. And this is supposed to be progress?

Up until now, our state has taken a community-by-community patchwork approach to protecting our citizens. Twenty levee boards have been created to oversee the state's flood protection. But here's the question. Why have any levee boards at all?

For well over the first 200 years of Louisiana's existence, all flood control efforts were constructed and paid for initially by the riverfront landowner, then by parishes adjoining the river, and then by funds raised by local levee boards. Federal involvement came about in 1917 with the passage of the Ransdell-Humphreys Flood Control Act where a flood control program was designed to give protection up and down the Mississippi Valley. There was no requirement in this and future federal legislation that states seeking flood protection form levee boards.

A few other states have levee boards. Mississippi has two. A number of states bordering the Mississippi River have none.

Louisiana spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year on various other construction projects without the oversight of any appointed board. In this fiscal year, there is some \$350 million in public building construction projects taking place in Louisiana. The state budget for highway construction this year will top \$755 million. No board, appointed by the Governor, is in place to oversee any of this construction.

The simple fact is that having non-professionals appointed to boards that are then given direct authority and control over basic protection to our public safety makes no sense in the 21st century. Professionals within the Louisiana State Department of Public Works and the U.S. Corps of Engineers would seem much better suited to design the necessary flood protection plan, and oversee both the construction and maintenance of such an important project.

If the Corps of Engineers, as has been alleged, made some serious errors in design and construction of our levy protection system, then they should

certainly be held accountable. But do we continue to allow untrained, average citizens with no professional background to make decisions, as we have tragically seen, which can lead to the most serious of consequences including the loss of human life?

Merely scaling down the present 20 levee boards to a handful doesn't really address the problem. Levee boards are outdated. They are a thing of the past.

The Dutch do not turn over the protection of their entire nation, one that mostly rests below sea level, to a board of non-professionals. Neither do the Italians in their efforts to defend their city on the sea, Venice.

We live in the richest, most powerful and technologically advanced nation on earth. Surely the Governor, the Legislature, and the federal government can get together and work out a better administrative system than we now have in place. There is just too much at stake.

Is electing levee boards the answer as has been suggested by one member of Louisiana's congressional delegation? That idea makes about as much sense as electing your local fireman or the police officer that protects your neighborhood. We can certainly do better than having more politicians in the mix.

The 20 levee boards that are scattered throughout Louisiana are, for the most part, made up of decent, hardworking people who hold a variety of jobs, and all who have one thing in common: they know absolutely nothing about building and maintaining levees.

Why not put levee oversight under the direction of a professional director, hired through a qualifications based selection process? This position should transcend politics and administration changes. This is an opportunity to end the parochialism that pits one parish against another as they fear levee boards will levy taxes to fund regional projects that benefit one area more than another. Statewide oversight would allow decisions to be made that are for the good of the state instead of drawing lines that shouldn't exist.

This is Louisiana's chance to take the politics out of engineering. These times call for drastic changes to the age-old system of political fiefdoms in Louisiana. A breath of fresh air would blow through Louisiana if the Legislature would only put levee construction and hurricane protection on par with other public works projects.

There has never been a more relevant time or better opportunity. Hopefully, the Legislature and the Governor will have the courage and the commitment to go back to the drawing boards and give it one more try.

But don't hold your breath.

"Seems the problem we have in this country is we either have too much moisture or too little moisture, depending on whether you're on the coast or in the interior," Chertoff said. "If we could average it out, we could prevent some of the disasters we've been faced with."

Homeland Security Secretary Michael

Chertoff

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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