

**Flood Risk of New Orleans**  
***PBS: NewsHour with Jim Lehrer***  
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Government officials announced their analysis of flood risk in the New Orleans and 4 nearby parishes Thursday, the first such assessment since the 1980s. Experts explain the mission to bring New Orleans back to its post Katrina days.

JUDY WOODRUFF, NewsHour Special Correspondent: In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans residents waited for months for new federal guidelines for rebuilding. The wait ended yesterday, when officials announced their analysis of flood risk in the city and in four nearby parishes and issued new guidelines. It was the first such assessment since the 1980s.

Under the new recommendations, new buildings, as well as structures significantly damaged by Katrina, will have to be raised three feet off the ground. Some older buildings may have to be raised even higher, depending on their location.

Government engineers say that will allow buildings to survive a once-in-a-100-year flood. Residents will have to abide by the new rules to be eligible for federal flood insurance. For many homeowners, the news was an important first step in deciding to rebuild.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco.

GOV. KATHLEEN BLANCO (D), Louisiana: People can use them to make their future plans. I know that that was one of the big uncertainties; a lot of people just wanted to be able to make a responsible decision, and they need to have this solid information to be able to proceed and make their decisions accordingly.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Crucial to these new guidelines will be the repairing and improvement of the levees and floodwalls. It is expected to cost \$2.5 billion beyond what's already been allocated. The Bush administration has pledged to ask Congress for the money.

The levees would provide protection for the entire New Orleans area, except for the lower Plaquemines Parish. Only half of the 28,000 residents of the parish have returned, and the Army Corps of Engineers said that it would cost another \$1.6 billion to fully protect the low-lying wetland area. That may end many Plaquemines families' dreams of rebuilding.

Walter Boasso is a state senator.

STATE SEN. WALTER BOASSO (R), Louisiana: No flood insurance, that means you can't get a mortgage. You can't get a mortgage, you can't get a house. And, so, in that

sense, you wind up with nothing at the end of the day. And that's where people would have to pack up and move on.

JUDY WOODRUFF: The Bush administration has not yet committed to seek further funding for the Plaquemines area, citing questions about whether improvements there would be economically justified.

For more, we are joined now by J. Robert Hunter. He is former administrator of the National Flood Insurance Program. He is now with the Consumer Federation of America.

Walter Isaacson, he's vice chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, a state rebuilding commission established by Governor Blanco. He's also the president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, a research and policy organization.

And Anthony Patton, he's a member of Mayor Nagin's commission to bring New Orleans back. He is president and founder of EBONetworks, a marketing company geared toward urban professionals.

Mr. Patton, to you first. Is this what you were looking for? What do you think of these new rebuilding guidelines?

ANTHONY PATTON, President-Founder, EBONetworks: Well, Judy, first of all, thank you for having me. As it directly relates to the rebuilding guidelines, we are absolutely ecstatic that we at least have something in our hands. Homeowners now can begin the rebuilding process.

It's still a little bit confusing, but at least it seems as though 98 percent of our city will be protected with the new levees, and I'm extremely excited to know that the base flood elevation, the 100-year base flood elevation, was not raised. So many of us can move on with our lives and start rebuilding our homes, and that's what we were waiting for.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Why is it important that that 100-year base elevation that you mentioned was not raised?

ANTHONY PATTON: Well, many of us were concerned about that because it would require every single homeowner to raise their homes. And in this case, it looks like there is isolated areas.

We certainly need to make sure now that the dollars that come down from the federal government through the state reaches those direct homeowners that are going to be required to raise their homes. Estimated cost are anywhere from \$30,000 to \$50,000 to do that, and the federal government should absolutely fund those individuals that have to raise their homes, and not everybody in the city.

JUDY WOODRUFF: So do you think that people, now that many people now will go ahead and rebuild?

ANTHONY PATTON: We think so. I mean, we're extremely optimistic, certainly as a commission, and me personally, with all of my friends that are still displaced. We were waiting on something.

One of the requirements that came out of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, one of the recommendations was to ask certain areas, Lakeview, the Ninth Ward, and New Orleans East to wait on rebuilding. And it turned into somewhat of a race issue.

And we didn't see it that way at all. We saw it as, "Let's wait on these FEMA guidelines so that you don't spend your money unwisely." And thank goodness that we made that recommendation, because had people in New Orleans East started rebuilding their homes, they would now find that they would have to start over.

So we're really excited that at least some of the recommendations we made in the beginning that were somewhat controversial have shown to be true and good recommendations, allowing our people to wait. And now they can go in with a true conscience of rebuilding their home. They know the levels that they need to meet, and we can move forward from here.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Walter Isaacson, you're nodding your head sitting here in Washington. You worked with the federal government to come up with these new guidelines. You feel good about them?

WALTER ISAACSON, President and CEO, Aspen Institute: It was really a good compromise and a good trade-off. Whether it was Don Powell's office, the Corps of Engineers working with the levees, everybody else, FEMA, what we said was: We'll try to build a higher, dryer city.

We need the levees to be stronger. They may get overtopped. We may get some water rising, so we should have to build above elevation. It's not only three feet above the base flood elevation, but some places it'll be higher.

But if we can build a higher, dryer city, and we can get good levees, and then we got, and the House and Senate have passed it -- we're just waiting for it to come through the committee -- the third leg of this, which is some housing money, so that if you're told you got to move out of New Orleans East or the neighborhood decides not to rebuild, you got up to \$150,000, minus whatever insurance payments you got, in order to rebuild higher, dryer in a safer place.

JUDY WOODRUFF: And just to be clear, this also depends on getting the levees rebuilt and improved?

WALTER ISAACSON: You know, I've walked those levees three or four times in the past couple of months with the Corps of Engineers and everything else. The levees will never be perfect. In the Category 5 storm, you're going to have some overtopping.

But what happen last time was they just breached. They just broke open, and a wall of water came in at eight or 10 feet and just stayed there. They're not going to breach anymore. They're armored levees. So even if they get overtopped, the way they're being built now, you'll not have this big bust of a break. And I think they're doing a great job on that.

JUDY WOODRUFF: But generally, you're confident. And you're saying people should feel confident.

WALTER ISAACSON: You should feel confident as long as you're building higher and dryer, according to these elevations, or taking the money and moving to a safer location. It is a good compromise so that we're not squandering the taxpayers' money. We're giving money directly to homeowners, either to rebuild, elevate or move.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Robert Hunter, you're with the Consumer Federation of America. Do you think people in New Orleans -- and, by the way, you're a New Orleans native -- do you think people there should feel confident with these new guidelines?

J. ROBERT HUNTER, Former Administrator, National Flood Insurance Program: No, no. In fact, I believe this is a very large, additional mistake by FEMA. And I don't think they have the authority to come up with this three-foot elevation, which is not based on any science. And if they're going to just make it up, why didn't they do it seven months ago?

WALTER ISAACSON: They didn't make it up.

J. ROBERT HUNTER: The new maps have not come out yet; the new maps have been held up. And I've studied the new maps in Mississippi. They're 12 feet higher than the old maps in Mississippi. The 100-year flood will breach the levee, even after 2010 when it's complete.

Between now and 2010, the levee won't even be up to the standard. And it won't, when it's finally complete, according to FEMA, it will not reach the 100-year level, which is the standard of the flood program. It will gut the flood program, if New Orleans is allowed to build below the 100-year standard.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Wait a minute. You're saying that you don't believe the government used science to come up with these new guidelines?

J. ROBERT HUNTER: No, they didn't. No. They are required by law to require a 100-year elevation flood. They say in their own flood recovery guidance that the levee, according to analysis by the U.S. Corps of Engineers, quote, "The flood control system will not meet the standards necessary to provide the 1 percent annual chance flood."

That means there will be overtopping; that means there will be floods again; that means the people are being invited in to unsafe situations; that means the taxpayers will be subsidizing unwise construction with low flood insurance rates.

JUDY WOODRUFF: All right, Walter Isaacson, I know you don't represent FEMA, but did you work on these guidelines. What do you say to that?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think it's just horrible to say that they made it up. We've been working them a long time. You may think, well, it should be a little higher here or a little lower there, but it's a very complicated study they did. It took them a long time. It's just wrong to say they made it up.

JUDY WOODRUFF: So how do you come together on this? I mean...

J. ROBERT HUNTER: Well, you walk New Orleans. Of course, you see places where the water was over the tops of buildings. You see places where it was inches. Three feet everywhere? How can that possibly be right? It can't be based on science.

WALTER ISAACSON: But it's not three feet everywhere.

ANTHONY PATTON: Well, let me make a suggestion.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Let's turn to Mr. Patton in New Orleans. Go ahead.

ANTHONY PATTON: Yes, Robert, I'd like to comment on that, too. And, certainly, all of us here in New Orleans, which I am, feel your pain. And, frankly, I think what we were most interested in was just having something that we can start with.

I think it's an awesome compromise, because it doesn't put all the onus on the homeowners. Certainly, they could suggest -- for example, my house got 8 1/2 feet. They could easily suggest that I should raise my house 8 1/2 feet, but that then would not take responsibility of the federal government's levees breaching.

And I think, in this case, the federal government is taking some responsibility and saying, "Look, we understand that it was the levees that breached." Had it not been for that, quite frankly, my neighbor road the hurricane out, and I called him the next day following the hurricane. My house didn't have any damage at all, except some wind damage. And then a little bit later, the next day he called me to tell me I have 8 1/2 feet of water, and that was strictly because of the levees breaching.

So, certainly, I think the three-foot grade elevation is a good idea. It helps us if there is some overtopping from the levee, certainly from floodwater, which we all had that in New Orleans previously. But then it doesn't put all the onus on the homeowner to raise their house up on stilts, and instead it puts more of the onus back to the levee, which is where it should be in the first place.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Mr. Hunter, doesn't he make a point here that this is a compromise, that you can't have a perfect system, but in order for some people to manage under these circumstances, you had to come up with something like this?

J. ROBERT HUNTER: The deal made with the taxpayer back when the Flood Insurance Program was started -- and I was there -- was this: We will give subsidies on existing structures as of 1970. New structures will have to pay full actuarial rates and be elevated to at least the 100-year level.

And the deal for the taxpayer was, if we're going to give low rates, as they'll get now in New Orleans, it will actually be safe. It's not going to be safe. Three feet will not do it. And we're going to end up -- the taxpayer will be subsidizing construction that will be risky and will lead to people being -- to maybe being killed again.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Walter Isaacson, that's a pretty heavy charge to lay on the table here.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I don't think it's three feet in every place. I think we're going to get money that Alphonso Jackson at HUD helped us get now so that we can move people higher and dryer and safer places.

As long as you don't have a major breach of the levee, if you just have slow rising because of overtopping, people aren't going to get killed. It's not going to be the same. And I think you have to be -- I'm sorry, you want to go ahead, Mr. -- go ahead.

J. ROBERT HUNTER: I was just going to say, that's a place we do agree. We have called for the federal government to help people elevate to the proper levels, but they need the maps to do that.

WALTER ISAACSON: And the maps don't just say, "Three feet everywhere." They're very complicated, good set of maps.

JUDY WOODRUFF: How much of this depends, Walter Isaacson, on Congress coming up with that \$2.5 billion to support the building up of the levee?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think the main thing you need with the levees is to make sure they don't breach, just like Anthony said. You don't want them to just burst out like that, and you can do that pretty easily. And that's what this new money for armoring the levees would do.

I don't think we can expect in New Orleans never to have any water, never to have any overtopping. It's going to flood there, even in heavy rains. So I think we'll get that money for the levees, and the money we have for the housing will be all we need.

JUDY WOODRUFF: What should, Mr. Patton in New Orleans, what should New Orleans look like after this? I mean, what in your view is the desired outcome here?

ANTHONY PATTON: Well, certainly, the desired outcome, first and foremost, is for every single resident previous to the hurricane to come back home and feel as though they're invited to come back home. Certainly, there's areas where they're going to need to make some tough decisions, as Walter talked about, where there will be dollars that will be allocated to them, where they may not want to rebuild in that exact location.

But I think that it's the responsibility of the local officials to show where homes or lots are available within the city of New Orleans, where they can come back to and rebuild. It should be a diverse and exciting city.

Frankly, if there is any one thing I would like to say that I think the federal government has not yet done its job, that I would like to see them do more on, is addressing the business community, particularly small business. I think they really should reach out to these individuals that have really just shown true tenacity in staying alive and offering services for people here in this city in a very tough time.

And I hope that they do, do a little bit more than the go-alone legislation that is enacted today, and just do it a little bit more quickly. We would like to see the money reach the people, and it will be an awesome city.

JUDY WOODRUFF: All right. We are going to have to leave it there. Robert Hunter, who is in New Orleans, Walter Isaacson here in Washington. I'm sorry, Robert Hunter who's here in Washington with Walter Isaacson. And in New Orleans, Anthony Patton.

Gentlemen, thank you, all three.

WALTER ISAACSON: Thank you, Judy.

J. ROBERT HUNTER: Thanks, Judy.

WALTER ISAACSON: Good to be here.

ANTHONY PATTON: Thank you.