Most industrial companies southeast of the unfinished Harvey Canal floodgate have agreed to inspections of their private waterfront levees to determine whether they can be raised by more than half their current height.

The Harvey Canal Industrial Association secured permission for the inspections from 12 of 14 property owners or tenants east of the canal and south of Lapalco Boulevard, executive director Peggy Bourgeois said. Another company approved the request verbally but needed to run it by its corporate office, and another company hasn't been reached.

After years of delay, the Army Corps of Engineers expects to begin building an 11.5-foot floodwall east of the canal by late summer or early fall. Although its cost is unknown, estimates before Hurricane Katrina projected the price tag at $60 million, and project manager Jackie Purrington said the cost has at least doubled since then.

Thousands of West Bank homes and businesses remain vulnerable to storm surges until the floodgate, slated to be completed in September 2007, is built.
The West Bank industrial association approached parish officials and the West Jefferson Levee District with a suggestion to raise the patchwork of private levees along the water from about 6 feet to 9 feet to provide better protection during the next two hurricane seasons. The consent forms allow levee district inspectors to enter the property to determine the project's feasibility.

Jerry Spohrer, the levee district's executive director, applauded the business group's attempt to reach out to the landowners. But he cautioned that inspectors might find unstable spots that wouldn't support several more feet of soil or riprap.

"It's great to talk about doing this and doing that," he said. "But remember, if the levees along the Harvey Canal were worth a doggone, we wouldn't be pursuing the federal project of building the floodwall."

The corps' most recent alignment moved the floodwall from the water's edge to just west of Peters Road because of concerns that barges could damage it underwater.

Spohrer said his agency might have extra fill to donate to the private levee project, but he stopped short of committing whatever resources the
Parish Councilman Chris Roberts said the parish might be able to spend up to $300,000 on the project. Nevertheless, he remained skeptical that it would provide quick, significant protection, especially if a business backed out at the last minute.

Meanwhile, business owners said they would proceed with the improvements only if the solution to raising the private levees doesn't restrict their water access for too long.

David Hanby, president of McDonough Marine Service based in Houston, said his Harvey Canal division must have water access to clean and inspect barges they rent out.

Similarly, Steve Barrios of Elmwood Marine Services said he wouldn't want added sandbags or soil loads to restrict his barge-repair crews' use of two driveways that allow them to cross from the industrial yard over the levee to the "Hero Cut" at the south end of the canal.

"If it were something that was proposed ongoing from now through the end of November, that would obviously be a deal-break for us," Barrios said.
In related West Bank hurricane protection developments, the corps is holding a conference today for contractors before soliciting bids on a hurricane-protection contract potentially worth about $250 million over three years. Corps spokesman John Hall said the contract probably would focus on West Bank hurricane protection projects, such as the floodwall.