Lawmakers block attempts to delay southeast La. levee overhaul

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) -- The state Senate on Monday blocked two attempts to postpone Gov. Kathleen Blanco's plan to consolidate southeast Louisiana's levee boards.

Earlier this year, legislators from the New Orleans area fought Blanco's push to do away with the boards - often blamed for poor upkeep of the levees protecting the region - and replace them with two "super levee boards" made up of experts and scientists instead of political appointees.

Blanco won the fight in February and the plan is set to go into effect later this year, if it gets support from voters statewide.

New Orleans-area lawmakers amended two bills last week to add provisions that would preserve the existing boards for an extra year, but the Senate rejected the amendments by Rep. John Alario and Sen. Ed Murray on Monday.

Senators rejected Alario's amendment after an objection from the bill's sponsor, Sen. Reggie Dupre, D-Houma. Dupre, a close Blanco ally, told colleagues that the Alario amendment should be rejected because it had nothing to do with Dupre's bill - a local measure concerning Lafourche Parish.

Senators agreed with Dupre, voting 35-1 to reject Alario's amendment. Sen. Chris Ullo, D-Harvey, another opponent of Blanco's plan, was the sole dissenting vote.

The amendment by Alario, D-Westwego, sailed through the House without objection, so the amended bill now goes to a committee of House and Senate members, to work out a compromise.

Murray, D-New Orleans, added similar amendments to an unrelated House bill but the Senate voted to strip them off. That measure must return to the House.

Blanco's plan is a constitutional amendment that needs approval from voters in September before it can go into effect.

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