Residents check out levees
Most adopt wait-and-see attitude in N.O.

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Published: Jun 2, 2006

NEW ORLEANS — Curiosity tempered by a “wait-and-see” attitude brought people out Thursday to several sites where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is repairing levees.

“I wanted to see it,” said Larry Blanchard as he stood on a bridge looking at the new floodgate closure on the 17th Street Canal. “I want to feel better.”

The corps held similar public gatherings at the Orleans Avenue and Industrial canals, but Blanchard didn’t plan to go to those.

“Emotionally, I didn’t want to get too close to that,” said Blanchard, who lives on Carrolton Avenue. “It’s too close to home.”

Jim Nolan, whose home was inundated when a 17th Street Canal floodwall broke, took his 8-year-old son, Michael, to see the work on the floodgates.

The gates are being installed to keep storm surge from Lake Pontchartrain out of canals that drain rain water from New Orleans. Floodwalls on two of those canals failed during Katrina, accounting for much of the flooding in the city.

“I hope it works,” Nolan said of the floodgates. “I think things are better than they were, but they weren’t as good as they should have been before.”

Earlier in the day, an investigative task force organized by the corps released a report that agrees with Nolan’s assessment.

“One thing made clear to us from the investigations was that we were wrong about the system’s performance during the hurricane,” said Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, chief of the corps. “Because of the failures in the hurricane-protection system, some question the capability of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.”

Strock said he understands that simply telling people things are better won’t restore faith in the agency.

“We are mindful that the public’s trust is gained when we follow through on our actions,” he said.

Strock said the levee rebuilding effort in the New Orleans area has used information from the Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force.
IPET, which has already been releasing findings as its investigation proceeds, released a draft of its final report Thursday in New Orleans.

The report differs from a recently released study by a University of California, Berkeley-led team.

For example, the task force report contends several breaches along the Industrial Canal occurred when water pushed the floodwall landward, essentially splitting the levee in half.

That was exacerbated by water overtopping the floodwall and eroding supporting dirt.

The Berkeley report, by contrast, contends many levees failed because underground erosion made the entire levee unstable.

The IPET report found that the corps isn’t organized to adapt quickly to changing landscapes or new research.

Ed Link, project director for the IPET investigation, said clues had emerged in non-corps research that floodwalls could fail as they wound up doing in Katrina. The corps and researchers don’t have an easy way to communicate such findings, he said.

“How do we connect the dots with the clues that are there?” Link said.

Strock agreed the corps isn’t organized in a way that allows it to make quick changes. That needs to change, he said.

Strock also said the levee failures prompted the corps to change the message it sends to people about safety.

“We used to talk about flood control and hurricane protection. Implied in that is that we will succeed in all cases,” Strock said.

Instead, he said, the corps needs to talk about reducing flood and hurricane damage.

Hurricane Katrina had a “sobering” effect on the corps because a corps project failed catastrophically, he said.

People at the 17th Street Canal on Thursday said the work on the new floodgate is impressive. But the question that remains is whether the gates and other hurricane protection will hold up.

“It’s just a wait-and-see thing,” Kenner resident Carolyn Marshall said.