WASHINGTON — Without fanfare, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a $94.5 billion spending bill Tuesday that includes almost $8 billion to shore up housing and crippled levees in Louisiana.

The House voted 351-67 to approve the legislation, which will now go to the Senate, where it also expected to easily pass today.

Though the $4.2 billion in housing funds and $3.7 billion to fix levees are the cornerstones of the hurricane relief portion of the bill, the measure also includes money for transportation, education, sugar cane farmers and a new veterans hospital in Louisiana.

“When we inject this kind of potential for the years to come, it’s unbelievable how important it’s going to be for Louisiana,” said U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman.

U.S. Rep. Charles “Charlie” Melancon, D-Napoleonville, welcomed the bill on two fronts. It includes $1.5 million toward phase one of the La. 1 toll road project.

In all, the measure includes $3.7 million for transportation projects in the 3rd District.

“All of it is pieces of the puzzle that we are putting together,” Melancon said.

Melancon, the former president of the American Sugar Cane League in Thibodaux, hailed the bill’s $40 million disaster relief assistance for sugar cane producers and processors in the state.

The legislation will also include $500 million in agriculture disaster relief and $118 million in support for fisheries.

“All farmers and fishermen in south Louisiana were especially hard hit by last year’s hurricane and the relief funding in this bill may save many of them from financial ruin,” Melancon said.

Hurricane Katrina hit the state on Aug. 29 and Rita hit Sept. 24.

Melancon said he regrets that the relief funding came through an emergency spending bill tied to about $67 billion for the Iraq war. The Bush administration will likely have to
draft more spending bills to address all the problems caused by Katrina, he said.

“I just wish it wouldn’t be fits and starts,” Melancon said. “I just wish there was a better system. This Congress is going to be looking at a fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth supplementals.”

U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, called the passage of the supplemental “the engine for the final leg of Louisiana’s recovery.”

Boustany was able to get inserted into the bill language that will extend the period of time that states and local school districts have to spend funds made available to them under last year’s hurricane relief legislation.

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., recently lauded language that she had inserted in the bill. It will allow East Baton Rouge Parish to use funds dedicated to capital improvements for operational costs. The measure was needed because of the parish’s growth, she said.

Meanwhile, the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana is praising a provision in the bill that will close the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet. The little used shipping channel is blamed for causing storm surges during Katrina.

“This is a day that the people of south Louisiana have been waiting years for,” said Mark Davis, executive director of the coalition in Baton Rouge. “It’s an important step in the right direction.”

But the housing money remained the talk of the Louisiana congressional delegation.

Combined with previous federal funds, the state will have about $12 billion for its Road Home plan to provide owners with damaged homes up to $150,000 minus insurance or other federal payments. The program is expected to affect about 120,000 homeowners.

“It’s huge,” said U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery, R-Shreveport. “It really completes the housing piece of the puzzle, which is critical to building back the whole region.”

U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, had initially wanted more housing money. But, he was pleased with Tuesday’s vote.

“I had always felt it was possible to work it out with this kind of money,” Baker said. “I had hoped for $20 billion but this is as much as we could get in this environment.”