Plaquemines demands levees
Residents deliver campaign to B.R.
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BATON ROUGE -- Waving signs proclaiming their love for their community, hundreds of Plaquemines Parish residents descended upon the state Capitol on Wednesday, demanding that federal officials rebuild levees that were severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina so residents can finally return home.

Chartered buses and private caravans carried residents to the capital city for the Stand Up for Plaquemines Parish rally. Some residents bore signs urging officials to "Cherish Our Parish," while others sported T-shirts saying, "Our levees broke. Our spirit isn't."

Business owners and residents from Pointe a la Hache to Buras cast aside territorial concerns, imploring federal officials to improve levee protection throughout the parish, especially in the south and east; restore coastal wetlands; and provide affordable flood and homeowners insurance.

Residents have been perturbed by reports that the federal government may balk at spending $3 billion to protect the 14,795 residents who lived outside of Belle Chasse before the storm. They also say that the Army Corps of Engineers has taken so long to repair and certify certain levees that the rebuilding process has been short-circuited.

Matthew Griffin, 85, of Bertrandville said he lacked adequate flood insurance and needs financial assistance to rebuild his home, which was destroyed by Katrina. He said he has been living in Bertrandville "all his days" and feels that Plaquemines, particularly the east bank, has been ignored by federal officials.

"I came here to get our share of the money," said Griffin, who is living in a FEMA trailer on his property. "It seems like every time they give out money, Plaquemines Parish is left out."

Parish President Benny Rousselle said the people of his parish are hardy, hard-working individuals who have been more than happy to make their own way without federal aid for years, but now need a helping hand.

"Our message today is that we're not going anywhere. We're going to be here," he said.

U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, said he has tried to impress upon federal officials the parish's importance as an economic engine for both the state and the nation. As a major source of seafood, oil and chemicals, Plaquemines is a major contributor to the federal government's coffers, he said.

Melancon said parish residents are not demanding a handout, but instead are requesting repayment for all they have provided the country.

"The least they can do is help us to help ourselves," he said. "As I've told the president, 'If you can't help us, then get the hell out of the way and let us help ourselves.' "

Gov. Kathleen Blanco echoed Melancon's comments and said she is prepared to begin denying any new permits for offshore drilling in August if the federal government does not agree to give Louisiana a share of the revenues from that drilling. Those revenues already have been dedicated to hurricane protection and coastal restoration, and they would provide the state with the autonomy it sorely needs, she said.

"I'm saying give us our offshore revenue and we'll get out of your face," Blanco said. "God knows the people of Plaquemines Parish have suffered enough. . . . Give us our money that we believe is deserved by our people, and we won't have to go begging all the time."
Some residents shared their own frustrations during the rally about their efforts to rebuild.

Victoria Jones, who lived in Boothville before Katrina, said she and her husband are anxiously waiting to rebuild their home, but have been stymied their inability to find out the new housing standards and to secure affordable insurance. She said her greatest fear is that many people will abandon their community, not because they want to leave, but because nobody is helping them stay.

"People cannot afford to wait any longer, they need to get on with their lives," said Jones, who now lives in Jesuit Bend. "My family lost everything in the storm, but never once have we thought about living anywhere but lower Plaquemines Parish. . . . We are very, very tired, and we want to go home."