WASHINGTON -- After some unexpected resistance, the Senate voted Tuesday to provide the additional $2.2 billion requested by the Bush administration to upgrade levee protection in the New Orleans area.

But the Senate opted not to follow Bush's advice to offset the levee spending with cuts in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster relief fund, increasing the cost of the emergency supplemental bill to $108 billion. The bill, which covers financing for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Gulf Coast hurricane recovery costs, faces a veto threat from Bush if the bill exceeds his request of $92.2 billion plus another $2.3 billion to combat avian flu.

The levee money was briefly in jeopardy when Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., objected on grounds that the levee work had not been authorized by Congress. He dropped his hold on the bill when he won assurances that a water resources bill, which includes authorization for billions of dollars worth of Army Corps of Engineers projects, would get early consideration by the full Senate.

'Another step closer'

Louisiana's two senators, Democrat Mary Landrieu and Republican David Vitter, hailed the vote, which brings levee financing in the supplemental spending bill to $3.7 billion.

"We are another step closer to having the protection we need," Vitter said.

Landrieu said the vote "marks another key step on the long road to comprehensive hurricane protection and flood control for southeast Louisiana." The bill is expected to win final Senate approval today or Thursday, an outcome that was assured when the Senate voted Tuesday to limit debate on the measure to 30 hours.

In presenting the request for the additional $2.2 billion, which includes $1.58 billion to replace "I walls" with stronger "T walls" and $530 million for upgrades of the 17th Street, Orleans and London Avenue canals, Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., chairman of the Senate's water and energy appropriations subcommittee, showed pictures of the levees that failed during Hurricane Katrina.

"As you can see, the storm surge pushed the floodwall out of alignment," he said after showing a photo of the breached 17th Street canal.

The Senate beat back amendments Tuesday designed to reduce the cost of the spending package.
Aid for shipyards

Among the items preserved is a proposal by Mississippi's two senators to provide Northrop Grumman with up to $200 million for hurricane-related losses at its Gulf Coast shipyards that its insurers are unwilling to pay.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., said it's wrong to put the giant defense company, which operates shipyards at Avondale and Pascagoula, Miss., ahead of homeowners who are having their own troubles collecting insurance. But Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran, R-Miss., said delays in getting the Ingalls Shipyard in Pascagoula back into operation would ultimately make military ships more expensive for taxpayers.

The Senate backed Cochran in a 51-48 vote.

The Senate also voted 59-40 to preserve the $6 million for two Hawaiian sugar growers that Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, had added to the bill.

Despite the victories over deficit reduction hawks in the Senate, there is likely to be heavy pressure to cut costs when House-Senate negotiators meet to resolve differences between the House and Senate spending bills. The House passed a supplemental spending bill last month limited to the $92.5 billion sought by Bush.

Local assistance

Among the amendments adopted Tuesday were three by Vitter. One would increase the cap for government disaster loans from 25 percent of a local government's annual revenue to 50 percent. The change, he said, would help New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish, in particular, both of which suffered heavy Katrina losses and a substantial drop in tax revenue.

Another would encourage more federal contracting opportunities for small businesses hurt by Katrina by declaring areas affected by Hurricanes Katrina or Rita as Historically Underutilized Business Zones. Vitter also successfully moved an amendment to allow a portion of the $100 million in the bill to help Gulf Coast fishers with cleanup and faculty repairs costs to go for vessel repairs.

Landrieu won adoption of an amendment that would require the Small Business Administration to present a comprehensive disaster respond plan to Congress before the June 1 start of the new hurricane season, and another that requires the agency to provide monthly accounting reports to Congress on the status of SBA disaster loans. Landrieu and other Gulf Coast lawmakers have complained that the agency has taken too long to act on loan requests and arbitrarily rejected many deserving applications.