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Chauvin levee improvements still await cash
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HOUMA -- Several Terrebonne Parish flood-protection projects could suffer months-long delays or even get scrapped if parish government doesn’t act soon on a request for additional money for a project to rebuild a section of Chauvin levee, a levee official said.

Earlier this month, a local engineer told Parish Council members that an additional $1.2 million worth of dirt is needed to complete a project to improve the southern end of the Chauvin levee. Though Hurricane Rita swept the dirt away in September, engineers with T. Baker Smith said they could not tally the total amount of missing dirt until this month, two weeks before the project was set for completion.

The project, to rebuild the section of Chauvin levee between the Lashbrook pump station and Boudreaux Canal, is being paid for by Louisiana Statewide Flood Control money and a local match split between the parish government and Levee District.

The Levee District also plans to split the extra dirt costs with the parish, said Jerome Zeringue, executive director of the Levee District. The Levee District recently shifted money in its budget, which usually includes about $500,000 to $700,000 in property taxes to spend on projects each year, to cover $600,000 worth of the cost of the dirt, he said. The District moved the money from other projects scheduled for this year, including work on the Bush Canal and Bayou Terrebonne levees, Zeringue said.

During the Levee Board’s May 15 meeting, members approved an additional $1.2 million for the dirt, in hopes that the parish would split the cost.

But shifting money to pay for dirt is more cumbersome for parish government.

Though unhappy about receiving the request for more tax money so close to the project’s May 23 deadline, council members voted to hold the matter in its Budget and Finance Committee for two weeks and have the parish administration try to find the needed $600,000.

But the issue did not appear on the agenda for Monday night’s Budget and Finance Committee meeting, nor did committee members broach the matter.

Instead, parish administrators plan to give a report on the topic to the council during tonight’s meeting, said Al Levron, parish public-works director.

Administrators say the parish has $600,000 set aside for the project, but whether that money will go to the purchase of additional dirt depends on whether the Levee District receives a request for more statewide flood-control money.
The parish budgeted the $600,000 for the project last fall, when the cost of the project jumped by $1.2 million. The cost increased after the Levee Board bid the project out on emergency basis and required the contractors to complete the project before the June 1 start of hurricane season. The project was originally scheduled to begin construction in January and take one year to build. Instead, the project started last fall and had to be finished by May 23.

The Levee District applied for additional Louisiana Statewide Flood Control money last fall to cover the extra $1.2 million cost of the contract.

Because the Levee District has already approved the extra money for dirt, allowing the contractor to continue work, no immediate action from the council is needed, Levron said. And if the Levee District does not receive the statewide flood-control money, the parish will be short the $600,000 anyway, he said.

"We don’t think there’s any need for any action," Levron said. "The money’s already in place."

Yet Zeringue said the lack of a definitive answer on whether the parish can split the cost places other Levee District projects in jeopardy, including work to build a ring levee on Isle de Jean Charles. The District will likely not know until mid- to late June whether it will receive the $1.2 million in flood-control money.

"It affects our budget" and how the Levee District proceeds on several projects, Zeringue said.

Levron and Zeringue say the statewide flood-control money looks like a good possibility, especially after talking with state Sen. Reggie Dupre, D-Bourg, who has been heavily involved in the process.

"Senator Dupre said indications are positive that the money will become a reality," Levron said.

"The likelihood is very good," Zeringue added. "We should get that money."

But if the statewide flood-control money doesn’t come through, the Levee District may have to shift money budgeted for the island levee, now out on bid, to complete the Chauvin levee work. In addition, work along Bush Canal and Bayou Terrebonne might have to be scrapped, Zeringue said.

The unknowns will not halt or delay work on the Chauvin levee, though, Zeringue said.

"We’re going to move forward on the project," said Zeringue. "We’re going to do whatever we can to get the project completed."