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Council delays action on money for levee lobbyist
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The Courier

HOUMA -- A new coalition will have to wait three weeks for the Parish Council to consider a request for $30,000 a year to help pay a lobbyist to push Congress for authorization and money to build Terrebonne’s proposed hurricane-protection system.

The Morganza Action Coalition is to raise $200,000 a year for three years in order to hire a full-time consultant to lobby Congress for federal money for the Morganza-to-the-Gulf levee system.

The Budget and Finance Committee voted Monday night to have the parish administration make a recommendation to the committee at its next meeting June 12.

Sharon Bergeron, a representative for the coalition, said now is the time to actively lobby Congress because of heightened national awareness, brought by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"We will have the most attention we will ever have," Bergeron said.

The coalition also expects the Water Resources Development Act to come to the Senate floor this summer, Bergeron said. She said all the Morganza project needs is authorization by the federal government, which should occur through the water act.

Some council members expressed concern Monday night about the legality of using tax money to pay for nonpublic lobbying activities overseen by the local coalition and asked attorneys to research the issue.

Courtney Alcock, parish attorney, said the coalition would likely have to abide by certain rules, such as disclosure of lobbying activities and limits on financial activities.

Councilman Peter Rhodes said the three-week delay will allow the public to have time to call their elected officials and weigh in on the matter.

Rhodes also said he thought lobbying was the job of elected officials in Washington, D.C., and that he did not approve of using public tax dollars for lobbying.

"As you said, there’s no guarantee," Rhodes said about the potential for successfully lobbying the federal government.

Parish President Don Schwab said he is against using public tax money for lobbyists, especially when the parish is considering asking voters to boost the sales tax by one cent to pay for levee work.
Councilman Clayton Voisin said he disagreed with the statements against spending public money on the coalition.

"I don’t see it as spending public money or wasting public money. I see it as investing public money," he said.

Most of the Morganza Action Coalition’s money would be raised through private donations, Bergeron said. If the council ultimately decides not to donate, she said, the coalition would still carry out its mission to lobby for the project.

The parish Levee Board voted in May to donate up to $20,000 to the coalition. The Houma-Terrebonne Chamber of Commerce made the first commitment, pledging $10,000, Bergeron said. Coastal Commerce Bank is pledging $10,000 a year.

No particular consultant has been picked by the coalition, Bergeron said, but one of the likely candidates is The Alpine Group, based out of Washington, D.C. Schwab asked that someone from the parish be included in the hiring process for the consultant, and Bergeron agreed to look into the request.