

Louisiana Recovery News 10.05.06

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LOCAL NEWS

Get flood insurance, La. official urges; Panelists shed light on recovery efforts

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 5, 2006

By Paul Purpura

While most Algiers homes had wind damage from Hurricane Katrina, homeowners should check their insurance policies to ensure they are adequately insured against

flooding, a top state insurance official said Wednesday night at City Council Vice President Arnie Fielkow's second "listening session" designed to hear public concerns.

"We need to be better prepared for the next time," Clarissa Preston, the state's deputy insurance commissioner for property and casualty insurance, told a group of less than 50 people who attended the session at Our Lady of Holy Cross College.

Flood insurance, Preston said, is generally excluded from policies.

"Invest in it. Get the flood insurance," she said. The listening session featured seven panelists who were available to field questions from the audience on property insurance, the state's Road Home Program and the city's Good Neighbor Plan.

Panelists included Donald Powell, appointed by President Bush last year to coordinate the federal government's rebuilding efforts on the Gulf Coast. Dressed in a black T-shirt and blue jeans, Powell kept his comments to a minimum.

Asked what the federal government is doing to curtail an increasing illegal drug problem in the city since the storm, Powell said more U.S. attorneys and marshals have been assigned here. But, he said, "crime prevention is a city issue."

He said Bush is committed to rebuilding the Gulf Coast, but the New Orleans area has "unique challenges," with the levee system. Money has been earmarked for housing, infrastructure, education -- what he called "long-term issues." The rebuilding process will get faster, he said.

Walter Leger, a member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority and chairman of its housing committee, echoed those sentiments about the pace of recovery.

In the weeks and months after Katrina, people responded to the question of "How'd you do?" by telling how many feet of water they had in their homes. Those greetings, he said, have changed to, "How's your house? Is it finished?" Recovery still is moving slowly, Leger said, but the "monumental task" of doing so has been developed as the process has unfolded.

"We're building this ship as we're sailing," he said. Part of the blame is the regulations attached to the federal money, which the state has. "It's their money we're using, and we have to comply with their regulations," Leger said. "We're moving quickly, but not quick enough."

Gary Delahoussaye, vice president of Eustis Insurance Agency, said the insurance industry in Louisiana is "in a poor posture" because of Katrina. The state has fewer insurance carriers, and rates are rising, he said.

Jefferson, Orleans and Plaquemines parishes are the toughest in the state for getting new insurance policies, he said, and that should serve as a warning to those who are insured.

"Don't give them an opportunity to cancel your policy," Delahoussaye said, advising people to pay their notes on time. "They're all trying to shrink their local business, not grow their local business."

Preston said the state is trying to lure more insurance companies to Louisiana to create greater competition, with the result of lower rates.

"It's a hard market right now," she said.

For those New Orleans-area residents who didn't have flood insurance, there is the state's federally financed Road Home program, which provides up to \$150,000 in grants to fill the gap between the total loss value of a house and the amount of insurance coverage and aid provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to cover the loss. The money does not cover a home's contents.

The program estimates 123,000 homeowners in the area are eligible for Road Home benefits, and more than 61,000 applications have been received, said Perry Franklin, the program's director of governmental affairs, community education and outreach. More than 5,200 applicants have been interviewed, but only 13 families have received assistance so far, he said. But he expects that number to quickly increase in coming weeks.

Meanwhile, Brenda Breaux, New Orleans' chief deputy city attorney, discussed the city's Good Neighbor Plan, designed to force homeowners to keep up their storm-damaged homes. The city had a problem with blighted housing before Katrina, Breaux said, but the plan presents "a good opportunity" to tend to the blight since the storm.

City code enforcement officers already have gone through City Council District A and part of District B to inspect blighted property, taking note of homes whose owners have made no effort to keep up the property and putting them on notice that they must take action, Breaux said. The program's intent is to "safeguard" homeowners who are tending to their property against those who aren't.

"Nobody wants to live next to a property, particularly post-Katrina, when nobody wants to do anything to remediate the problem," Breaux said.

Fielkow's first listening session was Tuesday night at the Jewish Community Center in Uptown. He said more such sessions are planned and will cover other topics but wouldn't likely happen until next year.

La. to use funds for training workers; \$38 million to help build labor force

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 5, 2006

By Will Sentell

The state will use \$38 million in federal funds to train workers for jobs in high demand after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Gov. Kathleen Blanco said Wednesday.

“We have jobs but we need workers and we need a labor force in order to get this immense amount of work done,” Blanco said. “I am determined that Louisiana workers will be the engine driving our growing economy.”

The money is part of the \$10.4 billion in federal aid, called community development block grants, that Louisiana has landed since the storms of 2005. The \$38 million for worker training is part of \$350 million the state designated for economic development.

The funds will be used to train workers for jobs in health care, transportation, construction, advanced manufacturing, oil and gas and the cultural sector, such as music and book stores, performing arts and spectator sports.

The hurricanes destroyed more than 200,000 homes and 18,000 businesses. Officials said it is too early to say how many jobs and workers might stem from the project.

However, the state’s unemployment rate recently hit a record low of 2.9 percent.

“We have a tremendous amount of work out there,” Blanco said. “Any person in Louisiana who wants to work can work.”

Andy Kopplin, executive director of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, said one recent success story can serve as an example for the effort.

A few years ago, Kopplin said, the New Orleans area faced a major health-care shortage. Officials of hospitals, doctors and other providers, colleges and universities and others met to figure out how to address those needs. Blanco and lawmakers later put state dollars into the effort, Kopplin said.

The project unveiled on Wednesday envisions groups that include employers, colleges and others forming alliances to seek aid for addressing worker training issues in construction, health care or the other four areas with pressing job needs.

Twenty parishes damaged by Katrina and Rita are eligible but Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Tammany and Vermilion parishes get top priority. Others are Acadia, Allen, Beauregard, Iberia, Jefferson Davis, Lafourche, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, St. Mary, Tangipahoa, Terrebonne and Washington parishes.

The effort is meant to answer the needs of employers seeking skilled workers and to provide jobs for those returning to areas damaged by the storms.

“We developed this program specifically to address the unique challenges facing our work force in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita,” said Matt Stuller, chairman

of the LRA's economic development task force. "Now Louisianans will have the resources they need to find good jobs in areas essential to our recovery."

State unveils \$38 million work force training program

Associated Press Newswires

October 4, 2006

BATON ROUGE - Louisiana is using \$38 million in federal hurricane recovery cash to start a worker training program to fill jobs in the construction, health care, transportation, manufacturing, petroleum and cultural industries.

The Recovery Workforce Training Program - designed to address worker shortages in areas damaged and rebuilding after hurricanes Katrina and Rita - was officially launched at a news conference Wednesday with Gov. Kathleen Blanco, the Louisiana Workforce Commission and other state recovery officials.

The workforce commission, which will administer the program, has begun requesting proposals from organizations interested in doing the training. The inquiries must be sent to the commission by Oct. 11.

"We are investing in this newly trained workforce to provide the support our families and communities need as they continue to rebuild," Blanco said in a news release.

The program is funded with hurricane recovery block grant money.

Police stretched thin by storm; NOPD counting on recruitment drive

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 5, 2006

By Laura Maggi

As the New Orleans Police Department battles a steady tide of crime in a repopulating city, its leaders also must deal with the reality of a diminished force, hampered by attrition after Hurricane Katrina.

Compared with a force of 1,668 before the flood, the department now employs 1,425 officers. Of those, 109 are on sick leave, and top officials say 150 more have put in applications at other departments that have contacted the NOPD for references.

What's more, though Gov. Kathleen Blanco said this week that she wants the department to wean itself off the extra help currently provided by State Police and the National Guard, the NOPD has only just begun to reactivate its recruiting and training apparatus.

"You can't just turn on a spigot and get new police officers," said Robert Stellingworth, president of the New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, which helps the department with recruitment.

Officials hope to launch a recruiting drive soon, and a class of cadets is expected to begin training in four to six weeks. But the time-consuming process involved in getting and training recruits means the bulk of the new officers won't be on the street for at least a year, Stellingworth said.

Stellingworth echoed the hopes of local police leaders in urging that the Guard, which has patrolled areas of New Orleans since June, be kept on beyond its current deadline to pull out of New Orleans at the end of the year.

On Wednesday, Blanco urged New Orleans police to get back up to strength, noting in particular that the loan of 60 State Police troopers has been a burden on state law enforcement efforts. The troopers have been helping patrol in the French Quarter and Central Business District since June, while monthly rotations of 300 soldiers from the Louisiana National Guard have been assigned duties in the flooded areas of the city that have fewer residents.

'Doing OK'

Police officials recently have expressed optimism about the state of the department and the ability to attract new officers, noting that although some officers might have put in applications at other agencies, not all will leave. Police Superintendent Warren Riley noted that although there have been a slew of resignations of officers whose families ended up moving away from New Orleans after the storm, a few have actually returned to their old jobs.

"Our department is doing OK," Riley said recently. "Our officers who are here . . . are doing a good job, doing the best they can under adverse conditions."

Capt. Robert Bardy, head of the department's 6th District, which is based in crime-ridden Central City, said that of the 122 officers under his command, he has lost only a few in recent months. One officer left last week to join her child, who has been living in Tennessee since the storm. But another who had been contemplating a switch to Jefferson Parish decided to stay, Bardy said.

"I think that the future is bright," he said.

Passing the tests

Recruiting police in New Orleans has always been a challenge. Figures supplied by the city Civil Service Department, which processes all police applicants, show that without any real recruitment effort by the NOPD, 182 people took the initial written and multiple-choice exams administered to potential officers, with only 106 passing the basic tests of reasoning, writing ability and memory.

So far, only 38 people have passed the rest of the selection process, which includes a background investigation run by the police, as well as psychological and medical exams.

Civil Service Department data show that the process typically takes at least a month and often more, with the background check requiring the most time.

Riley said he hopes to get an academy class of about 30 to 50 cadets out of the pool of applicants, including some who have not yet completed the screening process.

Starting a wide-ranging recruitment campaign, with the goal during the next couple of years of hiring 250 to 350 officers -- the number Stellingworth said will be necessary to accommodate normal attrition levels -- will be a key test of the city's bureaucracy, depleted of money and personnel.

Stellingworth said he has concerns about launching a major marketing initiative when he doubts the civil service agency can handle an influx of applicants.

"Civil Service has to be up and functional to do that process," he said.

Making do with less

Despite losing about two-thirds of its staff, Mike Madary, a top official at the Civil Service Department, said the agency will do its best to aid police recruitment, which has been a top priority for at least a decade.

"We will do everything we can," he said.

While two staff members handled police applications before Katrina, just one person was hired back into that job, and not until March, when the department started seeking new employees. Madary said that if the agency runs into trouble processing applications, it could ask the administration for more staff.

The assistance from State Police and soldiers has temporarily shored up the NOPD, letting Riley reassign officers to the districts that have seen the most criminal activity since the storm, intensifying the police presence in Central City, Carrollton, other parts of Uptown and Algiers.

Police officials have credited the redeployment with decreases in violent crimes, particularly killings, in those areas from high marks this summer.

Blanco intends for the soldiers and troopers to remain in New Orleans until the end of the year, said Marie Centanni, a spokeswoman. At that point, she will re-evaluate the deployment.

N.O. begins second phase of gutting law; It's re-inspecting 3,400 buildings ordered to be cleaned, secured

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 5, 2006

By Bruce Egger

Starting today, the city will begin reinspecting more than 3,000 blighted New Orleans buildings whose owners have been warned that their properties, most of them ravaged by Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters, are public nuisances and must be cleaned up.

It's the start of the second phase of the city's campaign to enforce the requirement that foul-smelling and environmentally hazardous buildings must be cleaned, gutted and secured.

The city also will soon begin asking nonprofit organizations that offer free gutting services to low-income residents whether they want financial aid from the city for their efforts.

City housing official Tony Faciane said Wednesday that in the next month, inspectors will check on the houses and commercial buildings that have already received initial warnings.

If the building hasn't been remediated, the inspectors will post new notices on the properties and the city will send a registered or certified letter to informing the owner of the date of an administrative hearing on the case. The hearings will begin in early November.

The properties' addresses also will be listed on the city's Web site, www.cityofno.com, and displaced owners who fear the city does not have their current address can check that site.

Inspections move east

Faciane said 3,408 initial public-nuisance notices were posted through last week on buildings in City Council District A and part of District B. Of those, at least 187 have been gutted and cleaned since the notices went up, he said.

Mayor Ray Nagin's administration said months ago that it planned to begin enforcing the gutting ordinance in districts A and B, gradually working east to districts C, D and E.

District A includes Lakeview and other flood-ravaged neighborhoods as well as Carrollton and other relatively unscathed sections near the Mississippi River. District B includes badly damaged Central City and the relatively undamaged Central Business District, Warehouse District and Garden District.

Faciane, Nagin's deputy executive assistant for housing, said the initial inspection of District B buildings should be completed in about two weeks, after which officials will "put their full effort" into surveying districts C and D, or basically the rest of the city west of the Industrial Canal.

Besides homes left shattered and mold-covered by Katrina, other blighted buildings as well as properties where grass and weeds have not been cut will be cited.

Under the revised gutting ordinance passed by the council just before an Aug. 29 deadline, the initial notices give an owner 30 days to "bring this property into full compliance by undertaking mold remediation, cleaning, gutting and properly securing the premises, and removing all public nuisances and/or blight violations."

The notices also include a list of 19 community groups and agencies that offer free or low-cost gutting services to those who can't afford to pay for the work. Most of the groups have long waiting lists.

After the second inspection

If a reinspection after 30 days finds the property is still in violation, second notices will be mailed and posted informing the owner of the date and place of an administrative hearing and warning that if the problems are not corrected, the city "has the right to enter private property, gut and remediate the property and put a lien on it requiring the property owner to reimburse the city for the costs," plus other penalties.

An owner can ask the hearing officer for a hardship exemption. "Acceptable reasons for a hardship exemption" will include that the owner has made arrangements for demolition or remediation but the contractor or nonprofit agency has yet to do the job. In such a case, "a reasonable grace period of 60 days" will be allowed. Owners who have applied to the city to voluntarily demolish their buildings will also be exempted.

The hearing officer may find the owner in compliance with or in violation of the law, or may allow more time to comply because of hardship. If the owner is found in violation, the property can be ordered demolished. But even then, the owner will have 30 days to appeal the judgment to Civil District Court.

The community group ACORN and other nonprofits notified the city Friday that they have backlogs of between 3,000 and 5,000 properties awaiting gutting, suggesting that a 60-day grace period is unlikely to be long enough for them to get to all of those sites.

City to offer aid

Faciane and Brenda Breaux, a chief deputy city attorney in charge of housing programs, said the city recognizes the problem and will soon offer to help such nonprofits by providing them with supplies, equipment and meals for their volunteer workers.

They said the city will issue a request for proposals to such groups next week, asking them to demonstrate their capacity to take advantage of such assistance and to keep the sorts of records required of groups getting government aid.

In addition, the city eventually will hire certified contractors to take care of properties whose owners cannot be found or who are unable or unwilling to remediate them. The contractors will be chosen by competitive bid after all the administrative hearings are held and the city knows how many properties it must take care of itself, Faciane and Breaux said.

The contractors will be paid with federal Community Development Block Grant money, and liens will be placed against the properties, they said.

Blanco cautious on insurance bite

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 5, 2006

By Will Sentell

Gov. Kathleen Blanco ignited controversy Wednesday when she proposed that the state spend at least \$50 million to help offset the skyrocketing costs of homeowners' insurance.

"Insurance is one of the biggest problems," Blanco said of post-hurricane Louisiana. "It is not the only problem but it is a looming problem that affects everyone."

But state Treasurer John Kennedy later charged that \$50 million "will not even be a drop in the bucket" for dealing with the insurance cost crunch.

"I don't mean any disrespect but I don't think the governor has gotten an insurance bill this year," Kennedy said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

He said the state should set aside at least half of its surplus, which he said could total \$800 million, to help offset insurance hikes caused by Hurricane Katrina.

"What does the governor think is a more important interest to spend the money on?" Kennedy asked.

The issue is relevant for homeowners statewide. They all face special yearly surcharges for the next decade or so to offset the debt faced by Louisiana Citizens Property Insurance Corp.

Citizens is an insurer for property owners who cannot get coverage from private insurance companies. Blanco noted that Citizens had to borrow \$1.2 billion to pay claims after the hurricane.

Now homeowners statewide are in line to repay that debt through annual charges, a development that appears to be little understood among rank-and-file taxpayers. The charge will apply regardless of whether homeowners are Citizens' policyholders or are insured by a private company.

All homeowners already face a one-time, 15 percent assessment this year. Assessments of 3.6 percent are set to begin next year and rise later. Future increases mean homeowners will pay up to \$55 extra for each \$1,000 in premiums paid annually to rescue Citizens.

Blanco, who has previously spoken in general terms about possible state aid to offset rising insurance costs, spelled out minimum dollar figures she favors for the first time in an interview after a news conference on worker retraining.

“We are definitely going to offset some of the increases caused by Citizens,” she said.

Blanco said the initial \$50 million would come from a \$150 million emergency response fund, which lawmakers approved earlier this year. That withdrawal cannot take effect until July 1.

In addition, the governor said she will spell out how much of the state’s surplus she wants to spend for insurance relief on Oct. 20, when the Joint Budget Committee identifies an estimated surplus figure.

“I will be making the announcement of what I have in mind because insurance is a big problem, but it is not the only problem in Louisiana,” the governor said. Blanco said \$50 million would help offset future charges homeowners face.

But Kennedy said \$50 million will not even offset the assessment faced by homeowners for 2007 alone, which will be about \$77 million.

“It will take care of a portion of it but not all,” he said. Kennedy’s suggestion for using half the surplus, possibly \$400 million, would offset the charge to homeowners for around five to six years.

Kennedy conceded that the state has other pressing needs after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

“But let’s face the facts,” he said.

“They found money for the Superdome. I suppose they will find money for Entergy.

“They will find money to build a new hospital. When are they going to find money for the people?”

“People are seeing their insurance bills go up anywhere from 15 to 50 percent,” he added. “We have a problem here.”

Asked later in the day about Kennedy’s comments Blanco said, “As governor I want to emphasize that there are many needs that are extremely critical to a full recovery.” She said she thinks lawmakers will be pleased with her recommendations later this month.

Blanco repeatedly declined to say how much in state surplus funds she favors using to offset insurance hikes.

"I really like to discourage people from spending money that is not really officially recognized yet," she said.

Blanco health plan price tag is hefty; Tab \$200 million more than spent now

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 5, 2006

By Jan Moller

BATON ROUGE -- A far-reaching plan by Gov. Kathleen Blanco's administration to provide a "medical home" for uninsured people in the New Orleans area would cost about \$200 million more than the state currently spends on indigent care in the region, according to preliminary figures released Wednesday.

The cost projections, developed for the Louisiana Health Care Redesign Collaborative, adds another hurdle for policymakers struggling to craft a redesign plan for a health-care system that was battered by Hurricane Katrina.

"There's a huge gulf in terms of covering everyone with an insurance product," said Health and Hospitals Secretary Fred Cerise, who leads the redesign group.

The 40-member panel is supposed to have a plan ready for U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt by Oct. 20 outlining broad changes to the Medicaid and Medicare programs that finance health-care for about half of Louisiana's citizens.

Leavitt has said that any health-care plan the state comes up with must be revenue-neutral, meaning it won't cost the federal government any more money than it currently sends to Louisiana. That means the state must either make up the shortfall with tax dollars or by charging co-payments and premiums to individuals and businesses.

Tough sledding ahead

The other choice is to scale back the scope of the redesign effort.

Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth, said any plan that raises costs for either the state or federal government would face tough sledding. "I'm betting that at the end of the day the federal government is not going to put up another \$200 million for the New Orleans area," he said.

The cost estimates are merely the latest problem for the redesign panel. As their deadline approaches to craft a plan that will meet with Leavitt's approval, group members are at loggerheads over the best way to redesign a system that has long been criticized for high costs and poor quality outcomes.

While the state is pushing a managed-care model that would beef up the existing safety net for the uninsured, federal officials and the Louisiana State Medical Society are promoting a plan to replace the existing safety net with government-subsidized private insurance.

Under the state's "medical home" plan, the estimated 100,000 uninsured people in Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes could choose among more than a dozen managed-care plans, which would consist of outpatient clinics linked to specialists and hospitals.

To qualify as a medical home, participants would have to meet quality standards established by the state, and to use electronic medical records as a means of tracking patients and reducing unnecessary care.

Medical-home voucher

People also would have the option of using the value of their medical-home plan as a voucher to purchase private health insurance.

State officials say that creating health-care systems where care is managed by a primary-care doctor -- rather than having the uninsured seek care through emergency rooms -- will ultimately lead to reduced costs and better outcomes.

But critics say the state's plan doesn't go far enough to eliminate the existing two-tiered system, where the uninsured are largely limited to the Charity hospital system while those with private insurance can choose from a wide array of doctors and hospitals.

Jean Sheil, director of family and children's health programs for the federal Center for Medicaid and State Operations, said the state's 14-page plan doesn't provide enough specifics. "There's not a document here that says what the model is," she said.

Consultants hired by the state estimate it would cost \$394 million a year to cover 100,000 uninsured people in the metro area using the managed-care approach preferred by Cerise. But that figure assumes that doctors and hospitals who participate in the plan would be paid under current Medicaid rates.

The actual cost would likely be even higher, because the state would probably need to pay higher rates to attract enough providers into the new system.

The plan would be financed using \$163 million in indigent-care Medicaid dollars that currently flow to the New Orleans area. Another \$76 million would come from savings in the Medicaid program by reducing unnecessary hospital stays and other inefficiencies.

But the savings would not materialize right away, meaning the state would likely face a shortfall of more than \$200 million.

Competing against the state's plan is a proposal developed for the Louisiana State Medical Society by the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank. Modeled on a plan recently adopted in Massachusetts, it would set up an "insurance exchange" marketplace where private insurance is bought and sold and through which the state could offer subsidized premiums for low-income people.

"The object is to get rid of state-run health care and make it individual-run health care," said Dr. Floyd Buras, a New Orleans pediatrician who heads the medical society.

It's unclear exactly what the medical society plan would cost the state. Cerise said the plan's financial assumptions are flawed, and that there's no mechanism to ensure cost savings. Critics also say that simply giving people insurance without managing their care in some way will do nothing to improve health outcomes.

City to award trash contracts; But bid details kept out of public eye

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 5, 2006

By Michelle Krupa

In what he has touted as major step toward cleaning up New Orleans' littered streets, Mayor Ray Nagin today is expected to award a pair of seven-year, multimillion-dollar contracts that combine traditional manpower with robotic technology to collect garbage in residential neighborhoods.

The deals for semiautomated trash pickup will replace the current trash-hauling agreement with Waste Management of Louisiana, which at about \$18 million annually is the largest service agreement awarded by the city. And it thus traditionally has been among the most politically charged contracts handled by local government.

But with Nagin poised to hand out the mammoth deals, city officials have failed to produce any contract bids or their rankings by a technical committee that reviewed them, despite repeated phone, e-mail and in-person requests for the public records during the past two weeks.

Few details are known outside City Hall about the potential contractors or their multimillion-dollar proposals. And City Hall officials, including spokeswoman Ceeon Quiett, declined comment on such basic details as the number of bidders and how much they proposed to charge in user fees for twice-weekly collection at 100,000 residential units and small businesses.

Since last year's flood, residents have paid \$12 per month for once-a-week trash pickup under a deal struck by Waste Management and the city, which also pays a portion of the collection cost.

Glaring omission?

The Purchasing Department's Web site, which generally displays all bids received for public services and equipment, has not included the trash deals in the past week. Nevertheless, executives from two large trash-haulers operating locally, Waste Management and Metairie-based River Parish Disposal, said Wednesday that they elected not to vie for the contracts.

In an Aug. 24 letter to Sanitation Director Veronica White, a Waste Management vice president wrote that after working in New Orleans for two decades, the company, one of the nation's largest garbage collectors, simply could not provide a "realistic cost estimate" for the requested services, some of which they characterized as excessively vague.

"Automated" services generally include the use of trucks with mechanized arms that grab uniformly designed trash cans and unload their contents neatly and quickly. On narrow streets, a sanitation worker may aid the robotic process, rendering the service "semiautomated."

According to the bid request, the new trash service is slated to begin Jan. 2, marking the resumption of twice-weekly trash pickup after more than 16 months. Starting this month, residents would be asked to visit sites across the city to register and to choose a trash can size -- 30, 60 or 95 gallons -- which the city would provide free, White has said.

Minority guarantees

The deals, extending through 2013, also require that the prime contractor engage a 50 percent partnership with disadvantaged business enterprises, a 20 percent increase over the current participation rate for women- and minority-owned business partners in the Waste Management contract.

The areas covered by the contracts are defined by geography. One covers Algiers, Uptown, Central City and parts of Mid-City; the other extends north from Esplanade and City Park avenues and into eastern New Orleans.

A third deal, set to be awarded Oct. 27, will cover the management of "Disney-like" round-the-clock trash collection in the French Quarter and Central Business District, with twice-daily trash collection and continuous sidewalk cleaning, among other services.

Though the request for proposals offers no suggestion of the value of the deals, it lays out over 22 pages the city's expectations, including that the contractor provide its own garbage trucks, open a permanent office in the city and maintain a performance bond for 100 percent of the estimated annual contract value.

In its letter, Waste Management market area Vice President Tim Hawkins ticked off several points of the city's request that he claimed made it impossible to write a bid with a definite price tag. He also noted the "impracticality" of providing automated service, given the city's "unique and historical layout."

Potential for problems

Hawkins wrote that because the city is requiring its trash-hauler to collect "unlimited bulky waste," the contractor could be forced to take on the expensive burden of collecting Katrina-related debris, even though such refuse is excluded from the garbage-collection contract.

Likewise, he wrote that the lack of guidelines defining "emergency collection" could require his firm to clear the city after future hurricanes, the cost of which also is unknown and therefore impossible to write into a fee schedule.

Despite its long history in New Orleans, Waste Management has fought its share of battles with city officials. The company and one of its subcontractors, Metro Disposal, came under fire several years ago from residents, city bureaucrats and politicians who complained of trash collectors soliciting "tips" and making a mess when emptying garbage cans.

The city in 2002 fined Waste Management \$1.2 million for repeated failures to comply with its contract, and a year later, 8th District police issued citations for faulty equipment to numerous garbage truck drivers, including one from Waste Management and one from Metro.

The problems seemed to have been rectified quickly. But since Katrina, residents have complained of off-schedule garbage trucks that frequently have left trash bags on the streets, creating a breeding ground for rodents and insects.

Landrieu Says Louisiana Lost 217 Square Miles of Coastline

Bayou Buzz

October 4, 2006

WASHINGTON – According to U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-La), the United States Geological Survey (USGS) on Thursday announced that Louisiana has lost 217 square miles of its coastline due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita last year. Mary Landrieu said in a news release that the area lost – nearly double earlier estimates – is larger than the entire city of New Orleans, and it is equivalent in size to three times the land area of Washington, D.C.

Sen. Landrieu further said:

“These findings underscore what I and other have been saying for many years: America needs to make a massive commitment to protect and restore our wetlands. Stronger wetlands and barrier islands can save lives and protect our people from hurricanes. They provide the first line of defense against storm surges and are essential to an integrated hurricane and flood protection system. For every 2.4 miles of wetlands, storm surge is reduced by a foot.

“In addition to the risk of loss of life and property in Louisiana and other Gulf states, coastal erosion presents a direct threat to America’s national security and economy by exposing our energy infrastructure. We must meet this threat with the sense of urgency a national problem of this magnitude demands. Louisiana already lost 1,900 square miles of coastal lands between 1932 and 2000, and the land loss from the 2005 hurricanes represents nearly half the predicted land loss for the next 50 years.

“This is why we need the federal government to share with Louisiana the revenues from our offshore oil and gas production to be used for hurricane protection and coastal restoration. The Domenici-Landrieu bill, which the Senate passed this summer, will give Louisiana a long-term funding stream to restore our coast and build strong levees. Now is the time to secure our coast and this new USGS study clearly strengthens Louisiana’s cause for a major national commitment to wetlands restoration and protection.”

Unfortunately, the Senate and the House legislation dealing with Revenue sharing did not pass before Congress recessed for the elections. The future of that legislation is now uncertain.

Actor Denis Leary helps Katrina-damaged New Orleans Fire Dept
Associated Press Newswires
October 4, 2006

NEW ORLEANS - More than a year after Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans, the only money spent to fix up wrecked firehouses has been private money, while firefighters live in mobile homes.

The city's capital projects department is still negotiating with the Federal Emergency Management Agency about what qualifies for the federal cash, said Carlene Barthe, a spokeswoman for the New Orleans Fire Department.

On Wednesday, actor Denis Leary and the Leary Firefighters Foundation gave the department a fleet of 15 flat-bottomed search and rescue boats and said it will help with rebuilding.

The other major donation was announced in February, when an international bank headquartered in Paris announced that it would repair and rebuild four fire houses.

The fire department was down to 10 of its 33 stations after Katrina. Sixteen of the flooded stations have since been repaired enough to occupy.

BNP Paribas North America Corporate Investment Banking Business said it would pay for all material needed and send employees to work with firefighters on the project.

The off-duty firefighters are not paid for the rebuilding, according to a news release Wednesday from the Leary foundation, which the comic founded after six firefighters,

including a cousin and a childhood friend of his, died fighting a blaze in an abandoned warehouse in Worcester, Mass.

The department owned no boats when Katrina struck. Members using their own boats rescued more than 18,000 people after the storm, according to the foundation.

OP-EDS/EDITORIALS

Editorial: Records secrecy stymies public

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 5, 2006

In the days immediately after Hurricane Katrina, the world saw what happens when a health-care system lacks the planning and resources to deal with a major catastrophe.

Many health-care workers struggled heroically, under desperate circumstances, to keep people alive until help could arrive. However, more lives could have been saved — and profound agony and hardship avoided — if health-care facilities had been better prepared for an event such as Katrina.

That is why it is vitally important for local, state and federal officials to work hard to ensure that health-care facilities are ready for any future disaster. The public has a right to know about progress — or lack of progress — on this issue. People should be able to gauge the hurricane readiness of area hospitals and other health-care facilities through access to government reports that are supposed to measure such readiness.

But incredibly, a federal official has blocked the release of a survey, undertaken by state and federal officials in August, that considered the ability of area hospitals to shelter in place with their patients instead of evacuating during a disaster.

Surveyors considered, among other things, whether hospitals have adequate staff, generators and food supplies in case of emergency. Surveyors also looked at what help hospitals might need if evacuations are necessary.

Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals general counsel Frank Perez said the agency was preparing to release the document in response to The Advocate's public records request.

But federal officials called state officials and convinced them that there is a provision of federal law allowing the documents to remain confidential. Federal officials maintain that the survey is a federal, not a state, document.

Before that, Perez said, the DHH had determined that nothing in the documents is confidential.

"It would be more harmful to keep it secret (and) increase people's curiosity," Perez said. We agree with Perez's observation.

The public should not have to guess about the content of government reports about hurricane readiness of area hospitals. Such secrecy will not assure the public that critical institutions are prepared for future emergencies.

But U.S. Department of Health and Human Services attorney Patricia Mantoan said that the survey could be withheld through an exemption to the Freedom of Information Act, a federal law aimed at giving people access to public documents.

Mantoan cited Exemption 5 of the federal law, which allows federal agencies to withhold “interagency or intra-agency memorandums or letters which would not be available by law to a party other than an agency in litigation with the agency.”

The exemption is supposed to protect the decision-making process, or “deliberative process,” of an agency.

We would argue that an agency’s deliberations about a matter of grave public concern are precisely the kind of thing that should be done in public view.

Also, we do not agree with Mantoan’s interpretation of Exemption 5. In a similar case in Florida involving records of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, a federal court ruled strictly factual data compiled by an agency is generally subject to disclosure.

The Florida case, like so many Freedom of Information Act disputes, ended up in court because FOIA is distressingly ambiguous. The law’s vagueness empowers bureaucrats to invoke its provisions, in often-creative ways, to shield important information from the public.

Congress should strengthen and clarify the Freedom of Information Act so it better advances the law’s real goal: easy public access to public records.

The Advocate has appealed Mantoan’s ruling to Robert Eckert, who handles Freedom of Information Act compliance for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Eckert said his agency has a big backlog of records requests, and he could not estimate how long it would take to find the documents at issue, then make a determination on whether to release them.

It might be true that Eckert has a big backlog of public records requests. A backlog would not suggest the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ranks quick access to public records as a high priority.

Finding the documents shouldn’t be a problem. DHH was ready to release them. And one can only hope Mantoan reviewed the material before throwing a shroud of secrecy over them.

As it stands, Louisiana residents in the middle of another hurricane season might not know for many months — if ever — the contents of a government report on whether area hospitals are prepared for another major storm.

The public deserves a timely response to public information requests. Even when an agency eventually rules in favor of releasing a document, information loses its value if it is not available in a timely manner.

We urge Eckert to act quickly to reverse Mantoan, and we urge members of Congress, particularly members of Louisiana's congressional delegation, to address this problem immediately.

Editorial: Stopping the slave trade
New Orleans Times-Picayune
October 5, 2006

Hurricane Katrina created economic opportunity for migrant workers willing to shoulder the tasks of cleaning up and rebuilding, but the storm also opened a new market for criminals whose aim is to exploit and enslave those same workers.

Fortunately, Louisiana is getting a \$450,000 grant to create a law enforcement task force on the slave trade. It's one of 10 new task forces that will be paid for by the Justice Department, bringing the total number of task forces nationwide to 42.

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales announced the crackdown at the National Conference on Human Trafficking held in New Orleans this week, and the Justice Department is right to focus on this issue.

The government estimates that 17,500 people in the United States are enslaved each year: forced by violence or threats to work in brothels, sweat shops or as domestic servants by criminals who prey on people's desire for a better life. The possibility that some could be forced to rebuild New Orleans is distressing.

Mr. Gonzales described human trafficking as a "violation of the human body, mind and spirit." He's right, and that's reason enough to take an aggressive approach.

But Robert Mehrrens, policy planning administrator for the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement, said that officials believe traffickers also bring in prostitutes and illegal drugs. New Orleans is already struggling with resurgent crime after Katrina. A new source of illegal activity can only make matters worse.

Mr. Gonzales described efforts in New Orleans as a pre-emptive strike. Hopefully, that will prove to be the case. Recovery from Katrina should make the metro area a better place -- not a center for modern-day slavery.

Op-Ed: Personal to the Levee Board: Time's up

New Orleans Times-Picayune
October 5, 2006
By Stephanie Grace

After rooting around for a while Tuesday, Roderick Hawkins, a spokesman for Gov. Kathleen Blanco, 'fessed up that he couldn't find a copy of a hand-delivered letter by the lame duck president of the soon-to-be-extinct Orleans Levee Board, asking that the governor create a brand new board to replace the old board.

Maybe Hawkins didn't look in the trash, which is probably where Mike McCrossen's 12-page plea ended up.

At the very least, the incident shows that the request isn't exactly on the administration's radar.

No wonder.

Blanco, after all, was a backer of the constitutional amendment to merge southeast Louisiana's many levee boards into two, professionalize their membership, refocus them on flood control and get them out of the business of real estate development and other non-flood related matters.

Throughout a pro-consolidation campaign that resulted in a 4-1 statewide victory at the polls last Saturday, the Orleans Levee District, aptly abbreviated as "O.L.D." throughout McCrossen's missive, was portrayed as the poster child for distracted and sometimes downright roguish behavior.

Everyone seems to get that, with the notable exception of McCrossen. His letter to Blanco, written before the public vote in anticipation of the approval, proposed that she create a new non-profit board of local appointees -- in effect, "Orleans Levee Board Lite."

Even as he professed complete support for the consolidation, McCrossen argued in the letter that the state, which is slated to absorb non-flood control functions, cannot possibly manage them as well as, say, a group of "local New Orleans citizens familiar with the non-flood assets and having operating and administrative business experience plus public service experience."

Sound like anyone we know?

Such a group, McCrossen said, would be "more responsive to local community standards, more sensitive to local interests in the utilization of the property" and "more accessible." In case anyone doubts that, McCrossen went on to congratulate himself for having provided advance notice of the board's meeting and allowed public comment -- both of which are actually standard practice for government meetings -- during his tenure as board president.

Rather than streamline the system, McCrossen claimed that Division of Administration management would be "cumbersome," as compared to an "efficient" local board that would provide the "optimum return" on investments -- in part because it wouldn't be burdened with "statutory procedural requirements" that require "involvement with the city or the Legislature."

Some might say that translates into no oversight and no rules.

McCrossen claimed that state management would effectively keep property out of commerce, insisting that the rules for sale of property would prohibit even a boat slip at one of the board's two marinas from being leased to a new tenant without a "cumbersome process," which hardly seems the requirement's wording or intent.

And he argued that the state would have difficulty managing property all the way in New Orleans, as if state employees never set foot outside of Baton Rouge.

In all, the letter reflects a naked plea to stay in power, and a spectacular misreading of the mood of the electorate and the governor's office.

McCrossen seems to think the merger movement wasn't personal.

News flash: It was.

If the New Orleans "locals" he claims to represent thought he was doing a bang-up job, 94 percent of them probably wouldn't have voted to eliminate his position and hand his duties to the Division of Administration, which McCrossen abbreviated throughout his letter as "D.O.A."

That's apropos, for this is one proposal that's dead on arrival.

Editorial: Just go away
New Orleans Times-Picayune
October 5, 2006

There is no doubt how New Orleanians feel about the Orleans Levee Board. They don't like it, don't trust it and don't want it to exist any longer.

As proof, 94 percent of residents who went to the polls Saturday voted for a constitutional amendment to abolish the Levee Board and replace it with a regional governing board made up of people who actually have expertise in flood control.

The near-unanimous contempt for the existing system doesn't seem to have registered with lame duck Levee Board President Michael McCrossen, though.

Despite the fact that the constitutional amendment provides for the state Department of Administration to take over the Levee Board's expansive real estate holdings, Mr. McCrossen wants Gov. Kathleen Blanco to set up a new local board to oversee the property.

"Because of the diverse nature of the (real estate) holdings, the public's interest would be best served and protected through management comprised of local representatives," he wrote in a Sept. 19 letter to the governor. He fears that management of the Levee Board's marinas, airport and the rest of its real estate empire might prove burdensome to the state.

What a thoughtful guy.

Mr. McCrossen didn't suggest anyone specific to be on this new board, but he must have someone in mind. Himself, perhaps? After all, he's not going to be busy once the Levee Board is dismantled at year's end. Nor will his Levee Board buddies.

They could just slide right into place on a new property management board and keep their fiefdom going.

Here's the thing, though. No one except possibly their friends and relatives seems to want Levee Board members to have power over anything.

Over the past 15 years, the board has spent millions on projects that have little or nothing to do with flood protection. When the hurricane hit, what could have been a sizable rainy day fund to use for levee operations had been frittered away on one misguided side project or another. One of the more absurd expenditures was for a study into building an island near Lake Pontchartrain's south shore.

Mr. McCrossen can argue that these offenses didn't happen on his watch, but that doesn't erase the levee system's well-deserved reputation for waste and cronyism.

Surely the governor, who campaigned for passage of Amendment 3, won't be drawn into Mr. McCrossen's poorly disguised attempt to hang onto power. But she ought to turn him down quickly, so that he can start planning his retirement from public life.