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# The Times-Picayune

## **SELA work at risk, Jeff says**

### **Broussard wants to meet with Bush**

Thursday, October 30, 2008

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**West Bank bureau**

Jefferson Parish President Aaron Broussard is seeking a White House meeting with President Bush to resolve a bureaucratic impasse that he says threatens hundreds of millions of dollars in federal money for flood-control projects in the parish.

The disagreement concerns the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project, an Army Corps of Engineers effort to improve drainage in Jefferson, Orleans and St. Tammany parishes in the wake of the May 1995 flood.

Broussard said the Bush administration has instructed the corps to work out an agreement for future SELA projects with the state, instead of with the individual parishes as has been done in the past. He said Gov. Bobby Jindal's administration has balked at signing an agreement, saying that only local governmental entities can enter into such deals with the federal government.

The impasse jeopardizes \$350 million for various Jefferson Parish drainage projects, including more than \$100 million for the "pump to the river" diversion that would send runoff from Hoey's Basin in Metairie to the Mississippi River, said Tim Whitmer, Broussard's top aide.

"This is putting at risk hundreds of millions of dollars that we'll never see again," Broussard said at Wednesday's Parish Council meeting.

Garret Graves, chairman of the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, said the state attorney general's office has released an opinion that says the Louisiana Constitution prohibits the state from entering into federal contracts for local drainage projects.

"Our hands are tied," he said. "We have to abide by the Constitution."

Graves said he supports Broussard's call for a high-level meeting to resolve the issue.

"I'm for anything that gets this process moving forward," he said. "The money has been appropriated, and some of the projects are ready to go. We need to start turning dirt."

Broussard belittled the significance of the attorney general's opinion, saying such opinions range in quality from "the Ten Commandments to toilet paper."

He suggested the Jindal administration is concerned that the state could be on the hook for hundreds of millions of dollars in matching money if the local entities cannot pay their 35 percent share of the project costs.

"We have always paid our share," Broussard said, noting that Jefferson Parish voters approved a 5-mill property tax in 1998 to raise matching money for SELA projects. "I find it very strange, if not insulting, that the state of Louisiana now questions our ability to continue doing so."

To emphasize his indignation, Broussard noted that the parish has a better bond rating than the state.

Graves agreed that Jefferson Parish has always paid its matching money, but he said that is not an issue in the state's opposition to taking responsibility for local SELA projects.

Graves said he sent a proposal to the assistant secretary of the Army calling for the parishes to continue signing SELA contracts with the corps. To satisfy the Bush administration's desire for greater cooperation between the state and local government, Graves said, his agency would sign agreements with the parishes to coordinate flood-control projects when possible.

Graves said he sent the proposal three to four weeks ago and has yet to receive a response.

Meanwhile, the Jefferson Parish Council unanimously passed a resolution Wednesday calling for a White House meeting involving Bush, Broussard, Jindal, Gulf Coast recovery coordinator Maj. Gen. Doug O'Dell and officials from New Orleans and St. Tammany Parish.

Council Chairman John Young, who sponsored the resolution, said he's concerned the disagreement could spell the end of the SELA program, which has resulted in more than \$300 million in drainage projects for the parish.

Broussard said it's critical to resolve the issue before Bush leaves office in January, saying it will take the new president time to get up to speed.

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