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Jeff Parish, state reach deal on drainage money

Broussard blasted slow progress

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After two days of spewing invectives against the Bush administration and the governor's office, Jefferson Parish President Aaron Broussard announced late Thursday that he had reached a deal with the state to unlock \$1.3 billion in federal money for drainage projects.

The deal, not yet signed, would let the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority sign off on a "project partnership agreement" with the Army Corps of Engineers, which would send federal money that Congress set aside this year for projects under the Southeast Louisiana Flood Control Program, Broussard said in a statement released Thursday evening.

Broussard and the state reached the agreement after a morning press conference by Broussard touched off a flurry of communiques between the parish and the governor's office, according to officials.

--- Partnering with corps ---

Following up on comments made at Wednesday's Parish Council meeting, Broussard on Thursday morning described a desperate situation where the "hourglass has only about two weeks left in it" before the federal SELA money would be lost to the parish "forever." At the same time, he castigated Gov. Bobby Jindal's administration and specifically the coastal protection authority's director, Garret Graves, for stonewalling any deal with the corps.

"Well, whatever terms and agreement they want to have to get that kind of money and those kind of terms, well, let's just sign on the dotted line," Broussard said. "Except that the governor has put this in the hands of Garret Graves, and Garret Graves has fumbled the ball. He has got this whole thing stuck on stuck."

Graves said Thursday he did not understand what prompted Broussard's comments. It is each parish's job to sign an agreement with the corps when it comes to SELA projects, he said.

"If the parish delegates their authority to us and the corps actually sends us an agreement, we'll sign it," Graves said before the deal was reached.

Under Thursday's deal, according to Broussard's statement, the state will sign an agreement with the corps to cover the \$1.3 billion, but then delegate SELA authority to local governments, including Jefferson Parish, to hash out future spending plans with the federal government.

"We will be developing an intergovernmental agreement between Jefferson Parish and the State of Louisiana, whereby, Jefferson Parish will assume all liability as well as financial and maintenance responsibility as it relates to the SELA Program in Jefferson Parish," according to Broussard's statement.

--- Confusion comes into play ---

Millions of dollars in federal SELA money have been received, mostly in Jefferson and Orleans parishes, since flooding in May 1995.

The problem seems to have emerged from two years ago, when Congress approved spending to study hurricane protection systems in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, officials said. With that money came the stipulation that Louisiana have one agency sign off on future federal spending for hurricane protection projects.

And so the governor's coastal protection authority, which Graves runs, was born.

However, it was unclear if SELA projects should also fall under the coastal protection authority, since SELA dealt with drainage, not hurricane protection.

And so, letters sent among Broussard's administration, the state coastal protection authority and the corps began. In June 2007, Stan Green, the corps' SELA projects manager, asked Graves' predecessor, Sidney Coffee, to clarify the authority's stance on the issue while recommending that local administrations remain responsible for signing any deals for federal SELA dollars. In a September 2007 response, Coffee agreed and said Jefferson Parish and the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board "should remain the non-federal sponsors for SELA."

But confusion likely began when the corps recommended this year that the state coastal protection authority be kept apprised of SELA projects in Jefferson and Orleans parishes, according to a letter Graves wrote to Broussard on Wednesday. Caught up in the fight was the \$1.3 billion that Congress approved -- \$838 million in June and another \$450 million in September -- and designated for work in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish, according to the corps. Jefferson Parish has designated 11 projects it hopes to finance with the money, including a plan to divert some floodwater from the Harahan, Elmwood and River Ridge areas to the Mississippi River.

--- Council members weigh in ---

None of the Parish Council's seven members was present for Broussard's Thursday morning press conference, but at least one agreed with the parish president's frustration with Graves.

"I wouldn't blame Gov. Jindal, because I don't know if Gov. Jindal is really aware of the games Garret Graves plays," Councilman Louis Congemi said. He posited that Graves was acting out of vindictiveness because the parish did not have his father's engineering firm, Evans-Graves Engineers Inc., construct a major drainage project in Elmwood.

Graves said Thursday the accusation "is completely absurd."

Other council members distanced themselves Thursday afternoon from Broussard's harsh words against Jindal's administration.

Councilman Chris Roberts said he supported Graves' work as the authority's director, saying he had been influential in accelerating improvements along the Harvey Canal after Hurricane Katrina.

"When Gov. Jindal hired Garret, I was glad to hear he was coming home to work on behalf of Louisiana residents," Roberts stated in an e-mail. "Not many people can match his credentials."

"I think we need to get the issues resolved, but I think we need to work together to get the issues resolved," Council Chairman John Young said.

The council had approved a resolution Wednesday to encourage all levels of government -- local, state and federal -- to quickly reach a consensus.

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