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## A gulf of opportunity

By Jeremy Alford (Contact)

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The buccaneers and sea rovers of 19th century Louisiana clung tightly to an area they claimed as their "kingdom by the sea," an untamed wilderness of marsh and cypress and mosquitoes leading out into the Gulf of Mexico.

They had few problems navigating barges and skiffs through the seemingly endless miles of coastal terrain around Barataria's three islands—Grand Terre, Grand Isle and Cheniere Caminada—but commercial fishermen still pass on tales about those lost to the maze from either madness or starvation.

This odd mix of heavy traffic, confusing waterways and minimal maritime enforcement made for a golden age in smuggling, but that was long before terms like "land loss," "dredge material" and "marsh erosion" became Cajun colloquialisms.

Today, most of the Barataria system that shielded infamous rogues like the brothers Lafitte is now vanishing, if not completely gone. Nonetheless, there still remain privateers that feed off of Louisiana's shoreline. Only now they're charged with missions paid for and assigned by state government.

The immediate aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, in particular, sent a flood of fly-by-night contractors and engineers into Louisiana, with many folding as soon as they set up. Most of that action, fueled by federal rebuilding money, has died down, leaving regulars like Bertucci Contracting in New Orleans, Coastal Environments in Baton Rouge and T. Baker Smith in Houma to resume their regular pace.

But another wave of new federal money, possibly as much as \$3 billion annually in coming years, is again surging toward coastal Louisiana. Congress has acted more swiftly, relatively speaking, in recent years on authorizations and appropriations, and the state is finally feeling the benefit. Granted, planning and engineering fees have been heavy as one study after another was called for, but actual construction is forecasted to rain down in the near future.

Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican, acknowledged the movement in his recent special session by committing \$300 million to coastal restoration and hurricane protection projects. As for specifics on how the megakitty might be spent, Jindal's team never addressed it in detail. That's because lawmakers were only asked to deposit the money into a special fund overseen by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, Louisiana's guiding coastal agency that has the authority to



*ROCKS SOLID: A rock dike barrier, built at Little Lake in Lafourche Parish, works to protect coastal wetlands and slow erosion.*

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sign contracts and spend money. The enacting legislation was a scant 188 words in length.

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That means the CPRA will be allowed to interpret the Legislature’s intent and is not technically bound to Jindal’s promise that 85% will be used for construction only—and not additional studies—because nothing akin to the vow was actually written in the legislation. To counter any concerns that might arise from the arrangement, Garret Graves, chairman of the CPRA, says public hearings on its spending plans will be held.

Moreover, he adds that every decision will be made in conjunction with the state-approved master plan for coastal restoration, hurricane protection and flood control, and the final product will be presented to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee. “I think all of us know there will be a great deal of focus on the CPRA’s work,” Graves says.

The \$300 million purse also places the CPRA in a position to serve as a real state agency, as it was always intended. But the transition is happening sooner than anyone expected. Scott Angelle, secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, says the panel, which was created by former Democratic Gov. Kathleen Blanco following the 2005 storm season, has suddenly become as “powerful as the LSU Board of Supervisors or the Superdome Commission.”

Angelle also admits that some administrative changes are being pondered for the authority during this time of transition, although details were scarce. “We’re looking at a few different things,” he says, “but it’ll hold until next month in the regular session.”

While the policy change can hold, attention for the coast cannot. State engineers and geologists contend more than 14 million square yards of shoreline have been eroded since the year’s beginning. In response, the federal government is expected to pump as much as \$15 billion into the dilemma by 2012—and that’s just the first wave of money. As part of the bargain, the state is expected to put up \$1.8 billion of its own money to match the federal expenditures during this timeframe.

According to Graves, the \$300 million line item in the recent supplemental appropriations bill is a jumpstart to footing the massive note. “This is just an initial payment,” he says.

The \$300 million purse is also record-breaking in that it’s the largest, single state expenditure—proposed or otherwise—dedicated to restoration and protection projects in the history of Louisiana government. Supporters say it’s an issue that is finally riding a crest, having been bumped into the national spotlight by the 2005 hurricane season.

Jindal just happens to be in the right place to go down in Louisiana’s history books as the “coastal governor.” An important ingredient of that legacy could be a new type of industry focused on coastal challenges, which would partially be located in Baton Rouge where the money is handed out.

While many of the contracting and engineering firms interviewed for this story refused to comment on the record about the expanding power of the CPRA and the plethora of opportunities to be had, Steven Peyronnin, interim executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, says there’s very few who can do the work that don’t understand the significance. That’s why he’s expecting another swarm of fly-by-night companies to crop up as the federal money spigot is turned on. But just like in the wake of Katrina and Rita, the posers will eventually fold and Louisiana will be left with the local staples and international powerhouses.

In the meantime, research papers, university research and business relocations are bolstering the argument that Louisiana is creating a new industry, Peyronnin says, providing there’s a positive

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backside to be found in even the direst of situations. It'll be another golden age for coastal Louisiana where privateers actually do more good than bad in the long run. "Louisiana is already uniquely positioned to become a global leader in this arena," Peyronnin says. "And as the world continues to deal with climate change and how coastal communities will be impacted by climate change and other factors, Louisiana will be the testing grounds for new and innovative ideas."

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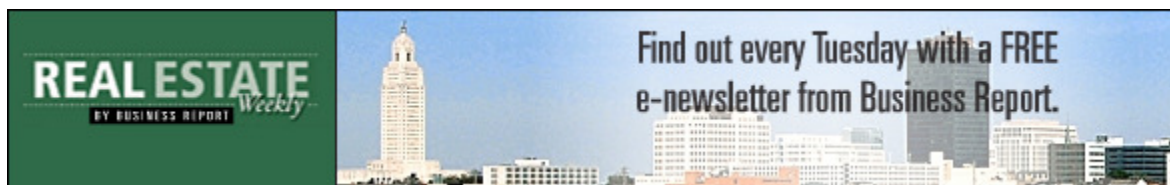
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