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## Levee work funds get OK

State money for land, borrow material

Thursday, May 22, 2008

By Mark Schleifstein

The state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority on Wednesday agreed to spend up to \$7.5 million in state funds to speed up construction of 100-year levees in the New Orleans area.

The authority will set aside \$2.5 million to acquire land needed to build gates, walls and levees in the V-shaped area between the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway in eastern New Orleans and the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet in St. Bernard Parish.

The Army Corps of Engineers has hired Shaw Environmental & Infrastructure Inc. to build the project, which is expected to include gates on the waterway and on Bayou Bienvenue in the middle of a triangular piece of wetlands, and a concrete wall connecting the gates with other levees.

State officials also will take a lead role in acquiring property along the project's route that is in the hands of both private landowners and the Orleans Parish School Board, said Garret Graves, chairman of the authority.

While the corps contract with Shaw requires the completion of an interim barrier across the V-shaped area by June 1, 2009, which would block storm surge from reaching the Industrial Canal from Lake Borgne, state officials have been concerned that the corps has miscalculated the time it will take to acquire the property.

"We looked at the corps' construction schedule and realized, if we don't do this, we'll be looking at a completion date of 2012 or beyond," Graves said after the meeting.

The state will advance the money for the land acquisition, even though the project is federally financed. The state's contribution will count toward required state payments elsewhere in construction of the levee system, Graves said.

The state also will spend as much as \$5 million to acquire borrow material on the West Bank for levee construction. The corps has been struggling to get enough quality clay for construction of earthen levees throughout the New Orleans area.

This money also will be counted against the state's share of construction costs .

The authority also set up a committee to explore how to deal with new corps construction standards that are driving up the cost of building levees and floodwalls.

The new standards were adopted after the corps-sponsored Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force studied why levees and walls failed during Katrina.

That could make projects too expensive for local governments in Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes, said Windell Curole, an authority member who is executive director of the South Lafourche Levee District.

Curole said such communities should be allowed to build substandard levees as stopgap measures, while waiting for enough federal and state money to build stronger levees, as long as their residents are properly informed of the increased risk.

Graves wouldn't go that far, but said there ought to be ways of building flexibility in the new rules to reduce costs.

"If you can use lower-quality materials and then armor the hell out of the levee and reach the same safety goal, rather than barging expensive clay from Mississippi, we should have that choice," Graves said. "Otherwise, you are going to literally price communities out of protection, and you're going to limit the impact and strength of the state's limited dollars."

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