



Everything New Orleans

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Residents urged to pester their lawmakers Promises to rebuild bring little comfort

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By **Brian Thevenot**
Staff writer

Outraged at the lack of a strong federal commitment to first-class flood protection for south Louisiana, environmental groups, a New Orleans City Council member and a church coalition activist gathered Tuesday at the London Avenue Canal breach to beg Louisianians to flood their federal representatives with mail, telephone calls and e-mails.

"If you're going to write one letter to your congressman in your entire life, this is that letter," said Mark Davis of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.

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The news conference hit on a point of frustration for many people in the region: Three months after the storm, federal officials have offered sympathy and vague commitments to build stronger levees and the state's eroded coastline -- but have made no commitment to pay for the work.

"It's been three months, and each day without a commitment is another day when a business that might have relocated to Houston or Atlanta will decide to stay there," said Aaron Viles of the Gulf Restoration Network.

At the height of Katrina's aftermath and criticism of the federal response, President Bush promised to "do what it takes" to rebuild New Orleans.

But no plan or price tag for the first step in that rebuilding -- flood protection -- has been forthcoming.

In a separate news conference Tuesday, Bush's newly appointed Gulf recovery and rebuilding coordinator, Donald Powell, was asked whether the president would commit to flood protection that would withstand a Category 5 hurricane. He responded that Bush maintains his commitment to a "stronger" levee system, without offering specifics, and repeated that the president has not backed off his earlier whatever-it-takes promise "one bit."

Still, the perceived lack of an ironclad commitment has provoked increasing rage from locals.

Category 5 levees for the New Orleans area could cost as much as \$3.5 billion, according to a recent draft plan by the Army Corps of Engineers, and take five to 15 years to complete. Gov. Kathleen Blanco has asked the federal government for another \$14 billion for coastal restoration projects. A restored coastline, state officials say, will reduce the height of storm surges before they hit the levees, as well as protect onshore oil and gas production facilities and provide a nursery area for fisheries.

It's a small price to pay for the payoff of saving one of America's jewels, said Mary Fontenot, director of All Congregations Together, a coalition of local churches.

"It's beyond me why they wouldn't do whatever it takes to save a city that contributes so much to the country," she said.

Residents want to return, Fontenot said. Her organization has contacted more than 3,000 people in member congregations since the storm, and the vast majority say they want to return and rebuild -- but feel they can't without a commitment to flood protection.

"I would say nine out of 10 people say they are committed to coming back, and all they need is a real commitment (to flood protection), but they're not hearing that from local, state and certainly not federal officials," Fontenot said.

After early comments from some officials questioning the wisdom of rebuilding a city below sea level drew intense anger, few if any officials have spoken out against making major investments in flood protection -- but neither have they acted to do so.

The opposition, Davis said, is more subtle and generally attributable to budget pressures to spend on other priorities.

"It's all carefully coded," he said. "It's a million questions being used as an excuse not to act, about whether we have all the science, and whether the community has spoken clearly. But we have plenty of science, and the community has spoken."

The voices advocating flood protection need to speak loudly, clearly and relentlessly, he said.

City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis, who toured devastated parts of the city Monday with the Dutch ambassador, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and a top Army official, said locals need to organize more trips for members of Congress to New Orleans so they can see the jaw-dropping devastation.

"People can't totally fathom or comprehend the nature of the cataclysmic damage unless they see it. The pictures are not sufficient, the words are not adequate," she said. "Once they see it, they understand."

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