

6 Southeast parishes unite for storm, flood protection



Advocate staff photo by JOHN McCUSKER -- Leaders from the throughout southeast Louisiana gather Tuesday in Jefferson Parish to make a regional push for flood protection. They are, from left, Kenner Mayor Mike Yenni, St. Bernard President David Peralta, St. John President Natalie Robottom, Westwego Council member Ted Munch, Jefferson Parish President John Young, Mandeville Mayor Donald Villere, St. Tammany President Pat Brister, St. Charles President V.J. St. Pierre, Pontchatoula Mayor Bob Zabbia and Garret Graves, Chair of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority of Louisiana.

by Allen Powell II

New Orleans bureau

Harahan — Citing a belief that a united front will have the greatest impact, government leaders from across southeast Louisiana gathered in Jefferson Parish on Tuesday to present a 10-point plan they say will improve flood protection and emergency response throughout the region.

Termed the “Storm Defense Compact,” the plan outlines changes that must be made to provide the best hurricane protection for parishes including St. John the Baptist, St. Tammany, St. Bernard, Tangipahoa, St. Charles and Jefferson. The plan, which has been submitted to Gov. Bobby Jindal, is an outgrowth of conversations local leaders have had with state and federal officials for years, but particularly following Hurricane Isaac.

St. Tammany Parish President Pat Brister is credited with bringing the leaders together, and she said it became obvious parish leaders needed to show unity if they wanted their concerns to get the proper attention.

One of the key goals of the compact is the completion of storm protection at The Rigolets and Chef Menteur Pass, which Brister said is vital to St. Tammany Parish.

“What this says is that we are going to continue to work together to come up with solutions,” Brister said. “We hope this is the beginning of the conversation.”

Jefferson Parish President John Young said Hurricane Isaac drove home the point that the current model for designing and implementing protection for the region is broken.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers takes too long to approve and complete projects under its normal operations, he said. Despite being viewed as a relatively minor storm, Isaac caused widespread damage across the region and catastrophic damage in parts of St. Tammany and St. John the Baptist parishes that avoided flooding in Hurricane Katrina and subsequent storms.

“Flood waters don’t recognize parish boundaries,” Young said.

The Corps of Engineers uses a reactive model for addressing the region’s issues and tends to implement projects at what can seem like a leisurely pace, said Garret Graves, director of the Governor’s Office of Coastal Activities.

Graves said he wants the agency to become more proactive.

Young added the agency needs to operate in its “emergency mode,” which is what got results quickly in Jefferson Parish and New Orleans following Katrina.

“It’s unacceptable for us to continue to be reactive in responding to these past storms” said Graves, who added flooding is obviously growing worse across the region. “We’ve got to stop this responsive method, and we’ve got to get in front.”

St. Charles Parish President V.J. St. Pierre said local officials are tired of corps inefficiency.

The agency’s behavior is unacceptable while Louisiana loses miles of coastline annually, he said.

“We need protection now,” St. Pierre said. “It’s just so frustrating.”

The compact features a mixture of easily implemented changes that can be completed immediately and large-scale projects that will require national collaboration. Officials said they recognize that any successful plan must incorporate a wide array of solutions from levees to coastal restoration to infrastructure improvements.

Brister stressed the document is meant to complement and supplement the Coastal Master Plan already developed by the state.

For example, the compact asks the National Weather Service to properly maintain storm surge gauges on Lake Pontchartrain and revamp its storm classification system to give more considering to storm speed.

The plan asks for an increase in state flood-control spending and forgiveness of the local match required for FEMA reimbursements. It also calls for the state Department of Transportation and Development to re-examine its contra-flow plans given how evacuation routes were affected by flooding during Isaac.

St. John the Baptist Parish President Natalie Robottom said discussions are under way to elevate portions of Interstate 10 in her parish, but those projects need to be expedited.

She added some flood protection projects in St. John have languished for decades waiting for federal officials to move them forward, and that is no longer acceptable.

“You can spend the money after or before,” Robottom said.

Young, who said areas such as Lafitte, Barataria and Grand Isle in his parish have been decimated annually, said it’s obvious money is a key impediment to improvements, but federal and state leaders need to examine their priorities, calling southeast Louisiana a crucial source of revenue and resources for the entire nation.

“It’s about money, it’s definitely about money,” he said.