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St. Tammany officials want to join forces with flood protection authority

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Sheila Grissett, The Times -Picayune

For the sake of securing much-needed protection from storm surges, St. Tammany President Kevin Davis thinks it's time for his parish to consider joining forces with the regional levee authority now representing much of the south shore.

Davis didn't outline an action plan or ask that the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East take any action Thursday during his first appearance before the 11-member board that was impaneled in January 2007 to improve regional flood protection.

"My understanding is the major role of this board is oversight and communications between the different levee districts," Davis said, adding that Hurricane Katrina taught the importance of partnering with others in hopes of speaking with one voice at the regional, state and national level.

The authority now manages the East Jefferson, Orleans, and Lake Borgne Basin levee districts.

But state law empowers the group to oversee some levee operations in St. Tammany and Tangipahoa as well, if those jurisdictions establish levee districts, meet other legal criteria and ask to become a part of the authority.

In fact, two of the authority's members live in those parishes: meteorologist David Barnes of Slidell and contractor Louis Wittie of Hammond.

Barnes and Wittie were asked during the authority's early months to meet with the chief executives of St. Tammany and Tangipahoa to determine whether there was interest in affiliating with the authority.

At that time, there was none.

In addition to recovery, Davis said he has focused since Katrina on advancing Army Corps of Engineers work on SELA, a federally backed program designed to improve subsurface drainage and reduce flooding.

Although SELA projects have been under construction in Jefferson and Orleans parishes for years, there is still only planning being done in St. Tammany.

Davis said he's done all he can with SELA and now is waiting while the corps again reviews some major changes the parish wants in the program.

And while he waits, Davis said he's ready to tackle an evaluation of the levee authority.

He said the next step might be to appoint new members to an old, inactive levee board in St. Tammany Parish. He said such a board, using existing parish staff, might be the best vehicle to drive a review that evaluates the pros and cons of linking the parish to the authority.

"After Katrina, I believe it's important to (form) partnerships that help secure protection," he said after addressing the authority. "I really believe the more people we surround ourselves with, the better our chances."

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