

Corps to take land for floodwall

Blanco signs order for parcels at canal

Wednesday, September 26, 2007

By Meghan Gordon

Gov. Kathleen Blanco signed an executive order this week to commandeer three strips of West Bank land needed to build a floodwall east of the Harvey Canal, a milestone in the critical hurricane protection project that has dragged on for years.

Until Monday the Army Corps of Engineers had access to only one section of the future floodwall's foundation, between Boomtown Casino and the Hero pumping station. Cajun Constructors of Baton Rouge is driving pilings there under the first of five task orders in the estimated \$250 million project. Blanco commandeered three more sections Monday, giving the corps access to land from the floodgate near Lapalco Boulevard to the previously secured section at the riverboat casino.

"That's the last sections for Jefferson Parish that needed to be commandeered, which is great news," said Councilman Chris Roberts, who devoted many speeches during government meetings last year to taking the corps to task for project delays.

The West Bank levee board asked the state to use the power under Blanco's emergency declaration to drastically accelerate the project, which was conceived decades ago and got under way in earnest only this year.

The orders allow the corps to start building the floodwall while its real estate division negotiates compensation with land owners.

Jerry Spohrer, director of the West Jefferson Levee District, said he will have a better idea of how the landowners would accept the commandeering decision next week.

Roberts predicted all would understand the urgency of the floodwall project.

"They all know that the corps is going to make good and come back and give them a fair value," he said. The corps needs acquisition orders from two more sections of land for the storm barrier, but both need support from the Plaquemines Parish government before the governor considers them.

Parish President Billy Nungesser said he still is unsure whether he will sign off on them because he doesn't know enough about the scope of the project. He said rumors that the corps wanted to extract clay from the property made him look critically at a proposed agreement.

"It's pretty much a blanket order that they want you to sign, and we have some concerns," he said. "I don't want them coming into Plaquemines Parish taking dirt. We don't have enough dirt to fix our own levees." Neither corps project manager Julie Vignes nor landowner Allen Hero could be reached for comment.

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