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Flood project agreements are signed

Pacts needed for work on levees

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By Meghan Gordon

Local and federal authorities working to give the West Bank its first complete system of hurricane defenses have broken through a months-old logjam by signing agreements vital to the uncompleted levee and floodwall projects.

Lawyers for the Army Corps of Engineers, West Jefferson Levee District and the state Department of Transportation and Development spent nine months negotiating the agreements, an impasse that threatened to delay construction on projects for which neighborhood groups have clamored for years. They finalized the contracts last week, with the local agencies signing them Friday and Col. Richard Wagenaar of the corps' New Orleans division signing them Monday.

Jerry Spohrer, executive director of the West Jefferson Levee District, hailed the milestone as proof that the projects would keep moving.

Though it took several months, "we achieved an agreement that is good for the non-federal sponsors and citizens of Louisiana," he said in an e-mail.

Negotiations stalled over who would pay for lawsuits that spring from future land seizures -- a problem that arose because the federal government eliminated the 10 percent local match for a chunk of the projects and told the local sponsors they couldn't count any expenses they incur toward future projects that carry the local match.

Local authorities also bickered over language that required them to guarantee the state would commandeer all needed land for the levees and floodwalls.

Project Manager Julie Vignes said the corps agreed to give the local sponsors credit for their expenses on some of the projects, which satisfied the two agencies. On the commandeering requirements, she said the contract includes more nuanced language than the earlier versions -- eliminating the concern of local sponsors, who said they couldn't agree to the provision if all commandeering decisions rest in the governor's hands.

Before the impasse, the corps promised West Bank residents their homes and businesses would be protected by a floodwall east of the Harvey Canal by September. But project managers pushed that deadline back many times because of the unsigned agreement and for other reasons.

Now the corps expects completion of just the first of five pieces by February 2008. It hasn't announced a new target for finishing the entire 4-mile wall.

Although the agreement eliminates a serious hurdle to completing the West Bank hurricane protection project, financing the system of levees and floodwalls remains an even greater barrier.

Within weeks, Cajun Constructors are expected to begin construction on the Harvey Canal floodwall's first phase, after which the corps would have no money in its West Bank accounts to build the subsequent phases. Louisiana's congressional delegation is attempting to secure \$1.3 billion from an emergency spending bill to pay for the remaining West Bank projects, but the measure has been caught up in debate over financing the war in Iraq.

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