Partnering for a Purpose

Prepared For Governor-elect Jindal’s
Transition Team on Hurricane Protection and Coastal Restoration
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It is no secret that coastal Louisiana, and by extension the entire state of Louisiana is at a crossroads. For decades the State approached conserving and restoring its coast and providing an essential and honest level of storm protection to its people and communities as just another set of issues. Important but not urgent. Things that could be pursued with half measures with no real consequences. To be sure in recent years the rhetoric was stronger and hopeful steps had been initiated, but that was belied by the facts. Simply put, our commitments to wetland protection, coastal restoration and honest, effective storm protection were not up to snuff. This situation was compounded by a similar ambivalence at the federal level.

The chickens came home to roost in 2005 and the both the failings of the past and imperatives for the future came into sharp focus. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita both the State of Louisiana and the Congress of the United States initiated comprehensive planning efforts to meld hurricane protection and coastal restoration into a unified program that would provide longer-term sustainability to the region.

Like virtuous living, effective comprehensive planning at this scale is easier to talk about than to do. It requires a degree of focus and collaboration that is daunting. But it is ultimately essential to any meaningful version of success. The Governor-elect is to be commended for making this an early priority. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts on this.

A Brief History:

The devastation wrought by Hurricane’s Katrina and Rita was not an unexpected natural disaster. They were stunningly powerful storms that would have done extensive damage but they were not the authors of the destruction and displacement that prompted the Legislature to form the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) and mandate the development of a Master Plan to guide storm protection and coastal restoration efforts or that led Congress to initiate the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Study (the LACPR). It is now absolutely clear that the catastrophic devastation was in large measure induced by a series of engineering and resource
management decisions—and failures. Unlike traditional flood or storm protection projects where the challenge is to reduce or eliminate the risk of damage by a natural event, the State and the LACPR must not only plan for natural events but come to terms with the stark fact that the focus of future hurricane protection planning must be on the shortcomings and failures of our existing storm protection and coastal stewardship efforts.

As the State and Federal efforts unfold we must always keep in mind that we have been here before. In 1965 Congress authorized the Construction of the Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project (LPVHPP). This project was designed to protect the New Orleans area from the “most severe combination of hurricane parameters that is reasonably characteristic” for the area. This “Standard Project Hurricane” (SPH) was determined to be one with 101-111 mph winds based upon information published in 1959 by the United States Weather Bureau. That is the equivalent of a weak category 3 storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale. The SPH was not modified over time despite 1979 revisions to the wind speed parameters by the National Weather Service to a 151-160 mph standard. In fact the LPVHPP hurricane protection system was designed only for surface wind speeds of 100 mph. These shortcomings were compounded by a series of design, maintenance, and location decisions made during the course of the LPVHPP that resulted in levees that were too low, flood walls that were defective, and pumps that could not or did not operate. On top of all of that, at the time Hurricane Katrina struck this system was only 60-90 percent complete depending on the area and coastal Louisiana was experiencing widespread subsidence and a landloss rate that averaged nearly 24 square miles per year. Given that history, it is easy to see why the American Society of Civil Engineers conclude that “A large portion of the destruction from Hurricane Katrina was caused not only by the storm itself, however, but by the storm’s exposure of engineering and engineering-related policy failures. The levees and floodwalls breached because of a combination of unfortunate choices and decisions, made over many years, at almost all levels or responsibility (emphasis added)”.

I believe it is vital to keep this history firmly in mind as the State begins to execute and refine its Master Plan. The lessons it teaches are both illuminating and cautionary. Any failure to learn from those lessons will be harshly judged and long remembered.

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2 What Went Wrong and Why, pg 65

3 Ibid. pg 66.

4 See Testimony of Anu Mittal, Director Natural Resources and Environment, GAO before House Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development, Committee on Appropriations, page 7, September 28, 2005.

5 What Went Wrong and Why, pg y.
I say this not to lay blame but to make the simple but essential point that unless specific steps are taken to avoid the pitfalls of the LPVHPP they will in all likelihood be repeated.

The Elements of a Successful Partnership.

Because of the scope and scale of this undertaking as envisioned by the Master Plan, it is vital to recognize up front that success will be impossible if planning and implementation is left to any single existing agency or authority to carry out. It will require a robust combination of State, local and Federal agencies, authorities and programs. It will require an unprecedented level of support and assistance from the private sector and from the academic community. And it will need these in time for it to matter.

The success of this partnership won’t just happen. It will need to be carefully crafted to identify and clear obstacles, to provide necessary resources and expertise, and most importantly to ensure that it is in fact someone’s job to do every essential task. The three critical elements of this partnership will be: Purpose; Jurisdiction; and Capacity.

Clarity of Purpose.

This is absolutely essential to get right. There must be no uncertainty about the purpose of this effort. The central failing of the LPVHPP was its loss of focus. Over time it concentrated on planning for a certain archaic storm, containing costs and accommodating competing interests instead of fulfilling its purpose of protecting metropolitan New Orleans, its people, its infrastructure. Unfortunately, this is one of the key weaknesses of the LACPR and, to a lesser extent, the State Master Plan as they presently stand.

To their credit, both the Master Plan and the LACPR seek to develop a risk based approach to planning and decision making. That is fine as far as it goes but merely reducing risk is not a purpose.

The purpose of the State’s efforts—and of any projects that emerge from it—must be some level of actual protection and definable benefit, not just a reduction of risk. Lost in all of the language of Category X storms or 1 in 100 or 1 in 1000 year protection is any sense of what those things mean in real terms. If the Corps is leaning toward 1 in 400 year protection (a Katrina-ish storm) as reported recently in the New Orleans Times-Picayune on July 29, 2007, that decision needs to be framed in words that mean something in terms of ecologic, cultural and economic vitality and sustainability. For example, will a given level of protection ensure the affordable availability of insurance? Will it convince the Red Cross to open evacuation shelters in New Orleans or Houma instead of viewing those areas as places to be evacuated? Will the protection come largely from structural, environmental or nonstructural components? Does it assume total evacuation or no evacuation? So far there are no answers to these questions. In fact there has been a general discomfort with the notion of even articulating a policy regarding
whether people should be encouraged to stay in New Orleans when a storm threatens. That should not be the case. Indeed, there is no similar discomfort when it comes to river floods nor was there in the past with hurricanes, at least prior to Hurricane Georges. I am not suggesting a cavalier “shelter in place” policy but rather a policy that is honestly based on the needs of the community and the capabilities of the natural and built defenses to cope with the risk.

The closest the LACPR and Master Plan come to this level of clarity is in their declaration of planning objectives, which include:

- Reduce risk to public health and safety from catastrophic storm inundation.
- Reduce damages from catastrophic storm inundation.
- Promote a sustainable ecosystem.
- Restore and sustain diverse fish and wildlife habitats.
- Sustain the unique heritage of coastal Louisiana by protecting historic sites and supporting traditional cultures.

These objectives are quite good and mark a commendable expansion of the objectives to be pursued and considered in the context of such a planning effort. The words “reduce” and “promote” do not rise to the standard of clear purpose, however. If the State settles for projects that reduce risk but not to a degree that really matters it will have achieved nothing.

More simply put, is it really a wise and defensible policy to countenance the complete destruction of urban and economic centers from storms with a 1 in 400 year probability of recurrence? Such planning horizons seem to be anchored more in the relative youth of this country than any informed sense of their present value. In a country where many of our major cities are under 200 years old, a 400 year horizon may seem like a long time. But when one contrasts that with the 1-10,000 year levels of protection for some coastal areas in the Netherlands and Japan the disparity becomes stark. Viewed in that light even the 1-1000 year level of risk (which is how the Corps defines the Category 5 storm risk) seems frightfully low. It is hard to imagine that Congress, using the broadest language available to it, had in mind a level of protection for south Louisiana’s urban centers, particularly New Orleans, so arbitrary and out of step with international standards and with the long term viability of the region.

Recommendations:

- Consider adopting a clear statement of purpose that is at the heart of all of the State’s planning and programming in this area. For example: “It is the State of Louisiana’s objective to achieve a south Louisiana in which people can live, invest, and do business with the confidence that they, their homes and their business are not at undue risk and that the coastal waters, lands

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and barrier shorelines that have shaped and sustained the communities and cultures of the region and contributed so importantly to the natural heritage and economic well being of this nation will be conserved and rehabilitated to ensure their vitality and sustainability. In the case of major urban centers it is the intention of this plan to provide a system of flood and storm protection with such a degree of confidence and safety that they will be places from which it will not be necessary to evacuate even in the case of a Category 5 storm.”

Jurisdiction.

The question of jurisdiction is crucial to the development and implementation of the plans and programs the State and the Federal governments are presently contemplating. Both the CPRA and the Corps of Engineers have been charged with developing comprehensive plans even though neither of them have comprehensive jurisdiction. For example both the Master Plan and the preliminary draft of the LACPR plan make clear how important “nonstructural flood protection” is but neither develop the theme because such matters as land use planning, building codes enforcement, zoning, and emergency planning are largely local matters and not within their jurisdiction.

It is essential that the State take steps to ensure that it has engaged as a partner every entity with decision making jurisdiction over the key elements of it action plans, beginning with the Master Plan.

It is vital that the State play this role since it comes the closest to having comprehensive jurisdiction and a mandate to look out for the best interests of the State and its resources. But extensive jurisdiction alone does not add up to comprehensiveness. The Governor must exercise his authority over the executive branch agencies with that purpose in mind. The CPRA was created to facilitate that but its success will be purely a function of the Governor’s commitment to having the State speak with one voice and for a clear purpose.

Recommendation:

Begin by reviewing the key action elements in the State Master Plan, the Louisiana Speaks Plan and the LACPR. For every major task there needs to be at least one entity with the jurisdiction to do the job and the expectation that it will.

Capacity.

Having jurisdiction and a sense of purpose are important but without the capacity to act on them they mean little. It is essential that every partner have the financial, technical and cultural capacity to do what is expected of them if this partnership is to prevail.
Recommendation:

Review the actual capacity of the various partners to carry out their tasks. Where capacity concerns are found the State must make it its business to cure those deficiencies.

In closing let me stress the importance of the State setting forth the essential terms of this partnership. In most partnerships there is a managing partner and in this one it must be the State, acting through the Governor’s office. All of the other partners-state, federal, local and private--will take their cues from the Governor. The key to a strong working partnership is a Governor committed to its purpose. That won’t ensure success of course, but failing to forge a strong working partnership may well ensure failure.

Respectfully Submitted,

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