Atchafalaya Basin officials spend $36,000 on travel

By MARY BROUSSARD and JAMES MINTON
Advocate staff writers

PORT ALLEN — Atchafalaya Basin Levee District officials cost the district's taxpayers more than $36,000 in travel expenses when they attended seven conventions and seminars during the past fiscal year.

The most expensive trip was to Miami where five of the board's 19 commissioners, three staff members and the levee board attorney spent a total of $8,094.10 in public funds, records show.

An almost equally expensive trip was a two-day convention to San Francisco. Five commissioners and a staff member attended the meeting at a cost of $7,394.77. The air fare included an extra $295 ticket used by commissioner Fred Smith to make an emergency trip home.

Travel to and from conventions is frequent for some of the 19 levee board commissioners. But former Commissioner Andrew "Murphy" Blanchard, 70, of Port Allen, and Smith, 45, of Lottie, led in the number of trips at taxpayers' expense in fiscal year 1987-88. Blanchard attended seven conventions or workshops and Smith attended five conventions or workshops during that fiscal year.

The opportunities for travel — which one commissioner describes as a "fringe benefit" — continued this fiscal year with conferences in Nashville, Tenn., St. Paul, Minn., and Washington, D.C. During fiscal year 1987-88, commissioners were offered trips to:

- The National Waterways
Trips
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- The Lower Mississippi Valley Flood Control Association annual meeting on Dec. 5, 1987, in New Orleans, which was followed by an Association of Levee Boards of Louisiana convention Dec. 4. Eleven people attended the meeting in the Crescent City at a cost of $7,300.50.

A breakdown of total expenses incurred on the New Orleans trip included: $2,628 for lodging and meals; $1,275 for per diem; $1,900 for registration fees; $327 for mileage; and $1,560 for miscellaneous, which consisted mainly of one meal for 22 people. The $1,042.93 dinner at the Pontchartrain Hotel for 22 people was hosted by board President L.J. Gre-zaffi, who was then serving as State Association of Levee Boards president.

Attending the dinner were four commissioners and their four companions, two levee board staff members and a spouse, nine officials of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and state Sen. J.E. Jumonville and his wife.

The Water Resources Congress annual convention in New Orleans, May 8-10, 1989. Only four commissioners and two staff members attended at a total cost of $2,509.37.

- An Association of Levee Boards workshop/seminar in Baton Rouge in August 1987. Eleven commissioners and eight staff members attended all or portions of the seminar. Expense vouchers show the seminar cost taxpayers at least $7,111.31 with the bulk of the cost being $750 in per diem for commissioners.

Questioned about travel, Gre-zaffi told reporters if they wrote anything they should acknowledge work by commissioners “with little or no recognition or little or no reimbursements to speak of.”

He said it was a policy for many years to have “decent representation” at conventions, where he said commissioners are brought up to date on Corps of Engineers projects on the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

Gre-zaffi said the district has cut back its travel in the past four to five years.

“At one time, years back, quite a few (commissioners) would go. Then the crunch came,” he said. He said it was suggested that only one staff member or the president attend conventions, but it is left up to the commissioners whether they feel they should go.

Gre-zaffi could not recall an instance when commissioners reported to the board on anything learned at a convention.

“We just haven’t had any reports and we don’t require any reports,” Gre-zaffi said. However, new commissioner Huse Brown of Port Allen “set a precedent,” in the words of one commissioner, when he filed a report on his recent trip to Washington for inclusion in the minutes of the Feb. 8 board meeting.

Gre-zaffi referred questions about the purpose of the National Waterways Conference and the Water Resources Congress to staff members Wallace Hargrave and Bobby Wilkinson, but said Engineers to discuss various projects.

The National Waterways Conference is a strong organization that promotes water uses, development of water projects and helps promote legislation that benefits water resources, Hargrave said.

The Lower Mississippi Valley Flood Control Association consists of states from Illinois to Louisiana that border or include the Mississippi River and its tributaries within their boundaries.

Hargrave said the group’s purpose is to promote and sponsor legislation to fund water projects, he said.

“If we don’t make our pitch, the money isn’t going to come our way,” Hargrave said.

Out-of-state trips typically include some entertainment or opportunities for relaxation.

For example, the San Francisco trip in February 1988 offered conventionees and companions a morning trip to the California wine country that a pre-convention letter said was likely to be “a fun-filled, relaxing, educational and perhaps slightly intoxicating day.” The trip also featured an evening dinner-dance cruise aboard the Horn Blower Yacht.

This year’s annual meeting of the Water Resources Congress in the nation’s capital included a day of sightseeing. The conference ended Feb. 3, but arrangements were made for a Feb. 4 tour of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md.

While some commissioners did not attend any workshops or conventions in the fiscal year 1987-88, others took advantage of the travel opportunities offered to levee board officials.

During the year, Blanchard attended all seven conventions and workshops, costing the levee board $4,782.35 in per diem and travel reimbursements.

Blanchard, when contacted about his trips, said he often represented commissioners or staff members who planned to attend conventions but changed their minds.

“I went because someone was planning to go and didn’t,” Blanchard said.

He said he went as a representative of the levee district and to learn more about levee boards.

Smith went on the Miami and San Francisco trips, and attended the two New Orleans conventions and the Aug. 1987 workshop in Baton Rouge.

The levee board spent $225 for Smith to make an emergency plane trip home from San Francisco in February 1988.

Smith said he had to put his mother in a hospital and got a doctor’s statement for the levee board’s files that he never turned in.

Smith turned in the doctor’s requisites to the levee board after reporters inquired about the emergency plane trip. The note dated May 19, 1988, and turned into the levee board office March 1, 1989, — is written by Dr. Louis A. Gallo of Lakeside Hospital in Metairie, Gallo indicated in the note that Charlie May Howard was “hospitalized for observation” Feb. 13-15 for hypertension.

Smith said the trips he takes are interesting and informative.

Other frequent conventionees in 1987-88 included:

- D.P. “Barrow” of Maringouin
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