EDITOR'S NOTE: The 1978 Louisiana Legislature approved a Coastal Zone Management Act. The Police Jury Association opposed this bill and supported another which we believed gave more authority to local governments. Local governments are beginning to set up programs under the act. The effects of it on local authority will not be known until it has been in operation for a sufficient length of time.

The following article was written by a staff member of the Coastal Resources Program. The article is based on her interviews with local officials as well as her witnessing of local meetings.

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After years of discussion and debate a coastal zone management act for Louisiana has been signed into law by Gov. Edwin W. Edwards.

Officials in the coastal parishes have kept a close watch on the development of coastal management in Louisiana. Henry "Junior" Rodriguez, a St. Bernard Parish police juror, perhaps summed up the feelings of many local officials when he recently said in an interview, "We want more control of our wetlands and the management of these wetlands."

The return of authority to local and state governments has always been a major goal of coastal zone management in Louisiana. Federal agencies, particularly the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, exercise a good deal of decision-making authority in the wetlands. Robert Becnel, parish administrator for St. John Parish, described the present situation in an interview, "Under the present situation, the Army Corps of Engineers plays God in the role of coastal management through their permitting system because we're only allowed to comment and they have the final say-so."

Under the provisions of the new law parishes who develop a local plan will be able to set up a permitting office in the indi-
individual parish. By placing the "permit window" in the parish, users of the coastal area will benefit. "We want to help the guy in the marsh," said Ernest Myers, a Cameron Parish police juror, at a recent Cameron Parish advisory committee meeting.

The new law calls for the setting up of a process whereby an individual parish will develop its own local coastal plan. This plan will be submitted to the state for approval. Once the plan is approved, the permit office will be in the parish and the local government will make decisions on permits which affect only the parish. These types of decisions are called "uses of local concern" in the new law. These uses include many currently being regulated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Activities which have a broader than parish-wide effect are termed "uses of state concern." Decisions on permits for uses of state concern will be made at the state level. However, the wishes of the parishes affected will be carefully considered.

Many parishes have begun work on the type of permitting process they will employ. This was the subject of discussion at a Cameron Parish advisory committee meeting. Advisory Committee member J. Braxton Blake commented on the possibility of local permitting saying, "This is the only chance we have to have some input."

Advisory committees have been working in many of the coastal parishes for two years. They are composed of interested citizens and local officials who are dedicated to serving the best interests of their particular parishes.

Their work has involved the development of a coastal program for their individual parishes. Clifton "Cliff" Aucoin, an Iberia Parish police juror and a member of the parish's advisory committee, said in an interview that information and maps supplied by the state program have been reviewed and local modifications have been made. Aucoin feels his parish, because of this work, has a "headstart" in formulating its local plan. Aucoin also feels the process of review was valuable because technical information was made available to the parish that it could not otherwise afford.

The Iberia Parish advisory committee studied and included in its year-end report to the police jury a permitting procedure for wetland activities. Similarly, other parishes are working on a permitting process. St. Bernard Parish has already begun such a program. "We started a permitting procedure in St. Bernard a couple of months ago. We have a permitting procedure for oil companies, seismic companies, dredge and fill. It's the beginning of what we think is going to be our permitting procedure for the coastal marshland," said Junior Rodriguez.

The St. Bernard Parish police juror feels the parish has certain problems in need of attention. Rodriguez summed up the situation and the feelings of local officials this way, "All the parishes probably have the same thing and its oil-related problems. And we all feel about the same — why should we take all the licks, and the oil and gas goes up to the northeast where they don't even want to drill."

Rodriguez has some ideas about what is needed to heighten the productivity of the wetlands. "Freshwater and a good marsh management program is what it's going to take to enhance our fisheries industry," he explained.

In St. John Parish, Robert Becnel tells about the past work of the parish as it moves toward its coastal plan, "We also for three years have been participating in the planning grants and have appointed an advisory committee that has drawn up a whole-per-
mitting process." Regarding the authority vested in local government, Becnel said, "We feel that the parish governing authorities will have more than an adequate voice in the permitting process."

According to Becnel, support for coastal zone management has always been strong in St. John Parish. He said, "The St. John Parish Police Jury has unanimously endorsed and supported a coastal zone management bill."

Public support for the program has evidently played a role in the police jury's stand. "It's very easy for the ten members of the police jury to unanimously support coastal zone management because the people as a whole support it," explained Becnel.

The parish official says this public sentiment can be attributed to people's understanding of the connection between wetlands, fish, and wildlife production. Research studies indicate a direct relationship between production and wetland acreage. That is, more acres of wetlands are associated with higher fisheries yields.

One indication of public sentiment in St. John Parish was the reaction to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' proposal to construct a levee around Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas. Recalls Becnel, "About a hundred people at a public hearing unanimously protested the idea of constructing a levee and destroying wetlands because we have, north of I-10 (Interstate Highway 10) going out to Lake Maurepas and Lake Pontchartrain, some of the most beautiful cypress swamps."

The citizens of the parish want the levee system "to protect populated areas only" and "not to drain the wetlands for real estate development," according to Becnel. "Most of the people here know what the wetlands are," he said.

Another reason Becnel cited for the St. John Police Jury's support for a coastal zone management plan for Louisiana was the possible alternative of increased federal intervention. "There was feeling in certain quarters that ultimately the federal government would come in and put down very severe regulations if Louisiana did not, quote, get its act together, quote," explained the parish
Becnel feels users of the coastal resources will benefit by the parish adopting its own coastal plan. Just as the state guidelines for activities in the wetlands will serve as a set of rules of the road, a local plan will help guide people. "We will have for the parish a uniform plan process and people coming from outside of Louisiana such as business and industry and so forth will know what the steps are if you're dealing in the coastal zone or in the wetlands," he said.

There are additional benefits to adopting a local plan. Under the provisions of the new law, financial and technical assistance will be available to the parishes. Local officials such as Cliff Aucoin and Robert Becnel seem to agree that the parishes cannot always afford to hire experts.

Under a coordinated state and local effort to achieve an effective coastal management program the local governments will be able to draw on the technical expertise assembled at the state level. Becnel hopes that the parishes will "utilize expertise and utilize knowledge that has been accumulated over the years, originally in the State Planning Office, and now in the Department of Transportation and Development."

Another major benefit of Louisiana's coastal zone management program is the Coastal Energy Impact Program (CEIP). The program provides financial assistance to help compensate coastal states and local communities which are affected by coastal energy activity and offshore energy development. Presently, Louisiana receives what has been termed "the lion's share" of this funding.

A number of CEIP projects have already been approved. These include a water storage tank in Grand Isle, a hospital in Morgan City, a hospital in south Lafourche Parish, a port in Lafourche, a port in St. Mary Parish, a park in Calcasieu Parish, a water facility in Cameron Parish, and a freshwater diversion project in St. Bernard Parish. The project in St. Bernard will help restore marshes in the parish.

"Our parish has been severely impacted through pipelines, through the construction of refineries, through barge traffic, all things directly related to the energy industry," said Becnel. The industry has attracted many people to the parish but the tax base has not expanded because of the homestead exemption. This has resulted in a "tremendous strain on our services and so we of the parish will try to pursue and get every available dollar for this parish that we are eligible for"
through the coastal energy impact fund," explained Becnel. On a humorous note he added, "So call it a ‘carrot’ if you will, we plan to take a very large bite out of it."

Local representation is yet another benefit of the new law. The Louisiana Coastal Commission will be composed of representatives of the parishes and various user groups. The following parishes will each appoint a representative to the commission: Cameron, St. Tammany, Vermilion, Iberia, St. Mary, Terrebonne, Lafourche, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, and Orleans parishes. The governor will appoint eleven user group representatives and of these members one will reside in each of the following: Calcasieu, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, Tangipahoa, and St. James parishes.

The commission will play an important role in reviewing the guidelines. The secretaries of the Department of Transportation and Development, Wildlife and Fisheries, and Natural Resources will develop the guidelines and submit them to the commission for review. A guideline would outline the manner in which certain activities would be conducted in the coastal zone. The guidelines will provide direction for the development of local coastal programs.
August, 1978

THE LOUISIANA HOUSE in session.