Dastugue, Atchafalaya Board square off

By MARY BROUSSARD
Westside bureau

The fire is stoked and fuel stacked for the showdown between state Rep. Quentin Dastugue, R-Metairie, and the Atchafalaya Basin Levee District.

Dastugue — who promises to abolish all levee districts in the state unless he gets his way — has introduced a bill that would take Morgan City out of the Atchafalaya Basin Levee District.

The bill comes at a time when Terrebonne Parish, another heavy oil and tax-generating area, also begins to leave the Atchafalaya District, the state's largest levee district charged with prevention of flooding and maintenance of miles of levees on the west bank of the Mississippi River.

The reasons for secession are varied.

Dastugue claims he was double-crossed. He never intended for Morgan City, located in St. Mary Parish, to be placed in the Atchafalaya district. Terrebonne Parish officials say they want to be in charge of their own destiny. They want to spend more money for seawalls and protection from hurricane flooding.

Although Morgan City and Tiger Island were included in the Atchafalaya district's boundaries last year, they have not begun paying taxes to the district. St. Mary Parish forks over about $28,000 a year to the district but will pay an estimated $200,000 this year, according to Wallace Hargrave, Atchafalaya district engineer.

Terrebonne Parish pays $700,000 to $800,000 to the district, a third of all the property taxes generated, Hargrave said.

Dastugue, a long-time crusader for levee board reform, said Hargrave misled him last year when state lawmakers approved an amendment defining the district's boundaries.

He lied to me and told me all it did was put it back in the original statute,” Dastugue said.

In response, Hargrave said Dastugue's latest bill is just a "grudge deal." He said Dastugue was consulted last year's amendment, but added that Atchafalaya officials led him to believe there was no change in the district's boundaries.

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The district, created in 1890, is composed of Pointe Coupee, West Baton Rouge and Terrebonne parishes and parts of Iberville, Assumption, Lafourche, St. Martin, St. Mary, Iberia and St. Landry parishes. In 1934, Tiger Island, on which Morgan City is located, was excluded from the district.

Dastugue thinks he may have the upper hand in removing Morgan City from the Atchafalaya district. He is also sponsoring a constitutional amendment abolishing levee districts and their boards of commissioners and placing the responsibility for levee maintenance and flood protection in the hands of the state Department of Transportation and Development.

"We're going to hold it over their heads ... I've already told them," Dastugue said.

Dastugue said his bill to abolish districts and place them in DOTD wouldn't affect the Atchafalaya district that much because it would remain one district.

"But they are scared to death of that because it takes away from all their little kingdoms and where they have all their little cars and police forces," he said.

Terrebonne Parish also wants out, according to state Sen. Leonard Chabert, D-Chauvin. He is sponsoring a bill that would remove the parish from the Atchafalaya district.

"We sustain the levee district," Chabert said. "But if we let it, we get the levee is all built, the river and everything else. We don't need (river) protection here. We need it from..."