Drainage project defended

Ascension Parish residents angered over flooding

By TIM TALLEY
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GONZALES — City officials Monday night came to the rescue of a publicly-financed drainage project which some Ascension Parish residents have blamed for flooding their homes.

The East Ascension Drainage Commission's multi-million-dollar plan eventually will eliminate the area's major drainage problems but cannot be implemented overnight, members of the Gonzales Board of Aldermen said.

"In the future, I think it will help everyone in the parish," said Aldermen Ronald "Joe" Waguespack.

Hundreds of homes and businesses in Sorrento, St. Amant and Acy south of Gonzales were flooded two weeks ago from heavy rains and wind associated with Hurricane Juan. The local flooding caused many thousands of dollars in damage.

Other areas of east Ascension received heavy rains but did not flood. Authorities said flooding in the southern portion of the parish was due to tidal conditions in Lake Maurepas and an east wind which pushed the tidewater up drainage canals and prevented them from draining.

More than 100 residents from the flooded areas appeared at a drainage commission meeting Nov. 4 and accused commissioners of mismanaging the drainage project.

The angry flood victims also accused the commission, which is an arm of the Police Jury, of improving drainage in Gonzales without improving drainage in the Sorrento area, and, as a result, floodwaters became bottled up in Sorrento.

Waguespack said Gonzales "got away pretty clean" during the hurricane and did not experience any serious flooding. However, Gonzales' good fortune was not the cause of Sorrento's misfortune, he said.

"I don't think they (drainage commissioners) dug out a certain area and put the water in one spot," Waguespack said.

The flooding was caused by tide and wind conditions and not by the drainage improvements, he said.

"I think they're doing a good job," Waguespack said.

Alderman Wally Waguespack said the drainage plan will take at least 10 years to implement.

"It's not something that can be done overnight," he said.

Voters on the parish's east side last year authorized a half-cent sales and use tax to fund drainage improvements. The commission has collected about $750,000 from the tax but needs $16 million to install pumps, floodgates and levees to prevent tidal flooding in the Sorrento area, according to drainage authorities.

"I feel for those people getting the water," said Mayor John A. "Johnny" Berthelot. "When you get it you have to blame someone for it sometimes."

"I think the jury's doing a good job," he said.

On another matter, aldermen set aside $6,000 to help defray the expenses of a group of French citizens who are planning to visit Gonzales next year as part of a cultural and economic exchange program.

About 50 citizens of Meylan, France, a suburb of Grenoble in the French Alps, plan to visit Gonzales for one week in May 1986 to sign agreements that will establish Gonzales and Meylan as twin cities.

A delegation from Gonzales visited Meylan last July on the first leg of the twinning program. Much of the American delegation's expenses were paid by the city of Meylan, Berthelot said.

Gonzales will need about $10,000 to pay for transportation, tours and some of the French delegation's meals, he said. Raffles and other fund-raisers should cover the expenses not paid by the city.

Meylan's assistant mayor, Mrs. Claude Moussy, will be in Gonzales Nov. 23-29 and will be honored at a reception Nov. 26. Moussy will be part of a delegation of 150 French businessmen and women at a convention in New Orleans.

The business group will tour the Gonzales area on Thanksgiving Day.

In other action, aldermen advertised for bids for recreational equipment.