Flooded residents blame drainage commission

By TIM TALLEY
River parishes bureau

GONZALES — Ascension Parish residents who have battled floodwaters for a week accused a parish drainage commission of mismanagement Monday night.

An angry, jeering crowd of about 125 people placed the blame for their flooded homes squarely on the backs of East Ascension Drainage Commission members who are overseeing a multimillion-dollar drainage program on the parish's east side.

"Y'allsold us down the river. We had water up to our necks," resident Denny Phillips said to commission Chairman Marvin Braud, a police juror from Gonzales.

The commission's work caused flooding in Gonzales at the expense of residents of Sorrento and other communities in the low-lying southeastern portion of the parish.

"They have been flooded no less than five or six times," said Mayor John leBlanco of Sorrento. "This flooding has disrupted their lives completely."

Braud and other drainage commissioners denied that they are "ignoring Sorrento's drainage needs."

"I know you have a problem and I feel sorry for you," Braud said. Revenues from a new half-cent sales and use tax dedicated to drainage improvements are not sufficient to pay for all of the drainage needs at once, he said.

The commission, which is composed of police jurors from east of the Mississippi River, adjourned after less than one hour when members of the unruly crowd repeatedly shouted charges at commission members.

"We didn't have peace here tonight," Braud said. "We've had no peace since Sunday a week ago," leBlanco snapped back. He said many flood victims do not have enough money to repair the damage to their homes.

Residents charged that improved drainage in the Gonzales area caused their homes to flood. Rainwater quickly drained out of Gonzales but became bottled up in Sorrento and other areas at the low end of the parish's drainage system.

Commission members said the flooding was caused by a steady east wind, which forced water from Lake Maurepas into drainage canals and prevented the canals from draining properly.

Tidal flooding from Lake Maurepas will be prevented when a system of pumps, floodgates and levees are installed in Sorrento and the other low-lying areas. The improvements will be funded with revenues from the new tax.

LeBlanco said he wants the commission to make the improvements a top priority, but Braud said the tax has not raised enough money to pay for all of the area's drainage needs. The pump and floodgate system will cost about $16 million, according to Braud.

LeBlanco also asked the commission to clean out Bayou Conway, a major source of flooding in areas of Sorrento.

"We can't clean all the bayous at one time. You can't do all that in six months," said Braud. The commission has collected about $750,000 in revenues since the tax was approved last year.

Work has not begun in the Sorrento area because engineering plans are not complete and required permits have not been obtained, said parish Administrator Moran Watson.

The parish spent about $250,000 in materials, equipment and manpower helping residents in low-lying areas fight floodwaters, Watson said.

"And we've still got a lot of cleanup to do," he said.

The parish delivered 7,500 cubic yards of sand and about 170,000 sandbags to homes threatened by floodwaters during the past week, Watson said.

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