Legislator wants Lafourche out of levee districts

By CHRIS FRINK
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State Rep. Mitch Theriot, D-Lockport, said Tuesday during a House Transportation Committee meeting that he wants to cut in half the number of levee boards operating in Lafourche Parish.

Four sometimes overlapping levee districts, two large and two small, serve Lafourche Parish.

The 11-parish Atchafalaya Basin Levee District operates in the eastern part of Lafourche; the six-parish Atchafalaya Basin Levee District tends the western area of the parish; and the North Lafourche and South Lafourche districts each cover their respective halves of the parish.

Theriot said after the hearing that he plans to work in the state Legislature's 1995 session to pull his home parish out of both the Atchafalaya and Lafourche basin districts, "so that the tax money will stay in the parish."

That move would shift more tax money into the two small levee boards to help the parish better cope with local flooding and drainage problems, Theriot said.

"We feel that the majority of the money goes outside the parish," he said.

You'd say that Lafourche Parish has an abundant supply of levee boards and no river levees," state Rep. Warren Triche, D-Thibodaux, said during the hearing.

"Our flooding problems are from backwater and rain water," Theriot said later.

The smaller North and South Lafourche districts concentrate on the parish's internal flooding problems, while the Lafourche and Atchafalaya districts focus on "main line" levees on the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers, Theriot said.

The smaller boards should get the larger boards' share of property tax money and instead make payments to help fund river levee maintenance, Theriot said.

Losing Lafourche Parish would "hurt," said Atchafalaya Basin Executive Director Bobby Wilkinnson.

"I think the public is going to fight it," he said. "They're going to remember the 1927 flood."

Legislation Theriot sponsored created the North Lafourche in 1992, but the district has yet to get off the ground after the Atchafalaya and Lafourche districts refused to make state-mandated payments to the newcomer.

North Lafourche won a suit last year to force the Lafourche Basin district to make its $200,000 annual payment, but lost a similar case against the Atchafalaya Basin over its $100,000 payment.

An 18th Judicial District Court judge ruled unconstitutional the statute that created the North Lafourche district.

An appeal of that case is on its way to the state Supreme Court, said William Dupont, the Atchafalaya Basin district's attorney.

"This levee board was expecting money from the other levee board (and) has held back on hiring a full-time employee," said North Lafourche consultant Wendell Currier.

Theriot pointed to Hurricane Andrew as an indicator that the South Lafourche flood control efforts worked.

"I wish we would stay in the Atchafalaya Basin," said Carroll Dantin, the Atchafalaya's president and Lafourche Parish's representative on the Atchafalaya's board of commissioners.

"We're in the same flood plain and should we have a (levee) failure, Lafourche would be in a hell of a fix," Dantin said.

"This effort is coming from the Legislature" and not from parish residents, he said.

Dantin said he and other board members will lobby against the move even before the bill is filed.

"The people of Lafourche would have a lot to lose" if the bill is passed, he said.

Dantin said the board was expecting money from the other district and has held back on hiring a full-time employee.

"The idea is to keep the people of Lafourche in the Atchafalaya Basin," said Atchafalaya Basin Executive Director Bobby Wilkinson.

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