

Barrier Cut from Lake Storm Plan

By ED ANDERSON
and LARRY CIKO

The controversial \$162 million barrier portion of the Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Plan apparently has been dropped although the levee phase of it is still alive, sources indicated Wednesday.

Gov. Edwin Edwards confirmed the agreement to drop plans to construct barriers at the entrance to the lake came at a meeting April 14 at the governor's mansion — a meeting involving Orleans Levee Board President Guy LeMieux and state Rep. Ed Scogin of Slidell, a long-time vocal opponent of the barriers.

"That is basically correct," said Edwards when asked if that was the upshot of the mid-April meeting. "The levee system for St. Bernard and lower Orleans (parishes) has been determined to be feasible without the barriers."

"Since they (the barriers) are not needed, . . . I have asked the (U. S. Army) Corps of Engineers to reconsider (the entire hurricane plan) . . . I no longer have any interest in pursuing" the barriers.

Earlier, Edwards said that he had suggested "the abandonment of the barriers as unnecessary and as possibly dangerous to the environment." Such a position marks an about-face for the governor, who has previously urged environmentalists to drop their objections — and lawsuits — to the barriers.

Edwards stressed that it is up to the Corps and "local authorities" — not him — to determine the fate of the barriers, just part of the overall \$409 million anti-hurricane program planned for Lake Pontchartrain.

"We are anxious to get the levee system started," said Edwards. "I don't want them slowed down. We are not pursuing the barriers (but) my primary concern is the levees. . . . I want the flood problem (in the New Orleans area) stopped."

Discussion of the project — which has been thrashed out in court, in the

political arena and by proponents and environmental opponents for years — began Wednesday when LeMieux referred to "the terrible barrier plan which we're giving up on" before a meeting of the state House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee in Baton Rouge.

LeMieux refused to discuss the matter for the record with reporters following the meeting.

Contacted by The Times-Picayune

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later in the day, LeMieux said he could not confirm or deny if the plan barrier plan had been scuttled.

Infuriated at the newspaper for a recent series of stories and editorials concerning the purchase of a plane for the levee board, LeMieux fumed:

"How can Guy LeMieux tell you anything you would believe? If I make that decision (to drop the barriers) — and it will be either me or the Corps of Engineers (to do so) — you can read about it in the New York Post."

"I am unhappy and bitter. Why should I tell you? I have been very badly treated by your newspaper."

Corps spokesman Bruce Sossaman said he was unaware any decision affecting the barriers had been made, adding the first he heard of such a move was when told by reporters late Wednesday.

Scogin said that he was "unofficially informed" by LeMieux that the levee board was "re-evaluating its position" as chief proponent of the barrier plan.

"As far far as I am concerned," Scogin said, "the issue is dead" unless it is resurrected "on the federal level."

Scogin said although he and Edwards differed in the past on the environmental effect the barriers would have on

the lake, he felt the governor always had the interest of the state at heart. "But I am sure the governor did not have all the facts at his disposal when he took that position," said Scogin.

U.S. Rep. Robert L. Livingston Jr., R-La., said he had not been informed that the barriers have been dropped from the program.

Livingston — who represents both the portions of Orleans and St. Tammany that would be affected by the barriers — added, "Quite frankly, I am not surprised. I am convinced the basic portion of the (barrier) plan would never pass muster."

If it is true the barriers are dead, said the congressman from Louisiana's First District, "we are losing an expensive, bad plan."

Late last year, U. S. District Court Judge Charles Schwartz blocked construction or any more work on the barriers, pending further review and more studies of alternative flood and hurricane protection plans.

Schwartz said at that time the plan was "based upon a design which had not been adequately tested" and ordered more environmental studies for the barriers which had been planned for the Chef Menteur and Rigolets passes of the lake.

Pontchartrain Hurricane Barrier Proposal Scrapped by Engineers

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Backers of a \$162 million project to build a hurricane protection barrier dam across entrances into Lake Pontchartrain decided Wednesday it wasn't such a hot idea after all.

The Army Corps of Engineers had proposed the barriers as the only feasible means of sealing off the 600-square-mile lake from a possible hurricane-driven tidal surge.

Orleans Levee Board and Corps officials were not available for comment on the report that the barrier project was being dropped but Gov. Edwin Edwards confirmed it.

"We suggest the abandonment of the barriers as unnecessary and as possibly dangerous to the environment," Gov. Edwards said in Baton Rouge.

Gov. Edwards said he and Sen. J. Bennett Johnston "still fully support the levee system, which is ongoing and is badly needed. However, it now appears that the barriers are not an integral part of the levee system."

The levees were being raised around a section of swampy east Orleans Parish, which environmentalists say should be left a natural wetland instead of trying to turn it into another flood-prone subdivision area.

Overall, barrier dams and an extensive line of levees and flood walls was budgeted at a total of \$409 million.

A U.S. District judge issued an order last year blocking barrier construction pending the outcome of a new environmental impact study. He said Corps plans for the barrier dams were "based upon a design which had not been adequately tested."

The barrier dams were to be built across Chef Menteur Pass, the Rigolets and across Industrial Canal.

If a hurricane approached land on a certain track, driving destructive tidal surges before it, the Corps said the barrier dams could be closed to seal off the lake.

In theory, closing the passes from the Gulf of Mexico into the lake would keep the tidal surge from forcing the lake over its levees and onto a large part of New Orleans or its suburbs.

Opponents said the dams could "kill" the big lake, impede navigation, and under certain conditions could even cause floods instead of blocking them.

Guy LeMieux, president of the Orleans levee board, told a congressional committee last January that the proposal to eliminate the barrier dam from the hurricane protection plan was "similar to people who say they want to go to heaven but they don't want to die."

Gov. Edwards said the fallback position now is "that we have full emphasis on construction of the levees, rather than confusing the two projects."

"We used to think that the barriers were integral, now we know they are not," he said.

In Washington, Rep. Robert Livingston, R-La., of New Orleans said the development means "we are losing an expensive bad plan."

"I really got in on the tail end of years of work by state Rep. Ed Scogin of Slidell. He convinced the people in his area that he was right, and he convinced me. I think we forced this thing to a head."

Livingston said he was glad to see the state finally acknowledge that the barrier plan "presented an economic and environmental hazard to New Orleans, posing the possibility that the lake could turn into a dead sea."