

But it is the strongest ruling to emerge since the architects of a post-Katrina public defender program have fought to provide adequate representation to the city's poor.

Friday's ruling came after months of hearings and motions filed by the public defender program seeking to find its footing after it went broke after Katrina and lost almost its entire staff.

District Attorney Eddie Jordan's office said it plans to appeal Hunter's ruling, maintaining its argument that the courts should appoint lawyers instead of freeing pretrial defendants. Both Hunter and the public defender program leaders say there is not enough money to contract out every case to private attorneys.

In October, Hunter released four people awaiting trial on misdemeanor charges, and he warned then that because the Constitution does not distinguish between felony and misdemeanor charges when it comes to the right to representation, more would follow.

The 42 defendants on Hunter's list of possible releases from jail are largely facing narcotics charges, although at least two are accused of armed robbery and one of sexual battery. The public defender's office has said all of the cases involve defendants who are receiving little if any representation in court due to the strapped system.

Long waits in jail

Defense attorneys have said many poor defendants are so desperate to get out of jail after long stretches of waiting for their cases to move forward that they will often plead guilty just to be done with their legal troubles, waiving their rights to fight the charges in court.

In Hunter's Section K of Criminal District Court, the only section in which he may rule upon cases, the public defender is unable to effectively serve each of his clients in the 167 cases on his plate, Hunter ruled.

Steve Singer, chief of trials for the public defender program, said \$2.1 million would suffice to properly staff a post-Katrina office. That is about one-third more than the office currently has, Singer said.

To date, the public defender program has 26 full-time attorneys working at Criminal District Court and a caseload that stands at about 2,520 felony cases. The juvenile court in Orleans Parish has six public defenders assigned to the six sections of court.

Christine Lehmann, an attorney for the public defender program who filed the motion Hunter ruled on Friday, said that for decades Criminal District Court has valued "speed over accuracy" and left the poor to navigate the system at their peril.

"It shouldn't be analogous to a shoe factory, but to a hospital," Lehmann said after the ruling. "These are people's lives."

Hunter said his ruling applies to the statewide public defense system, which the Legislature has known is failing since 1972.

Starting over

Singer and his colleagues are re-creating the public defender system, which kept no records before Katrina and allowed its lawyers to

moonlight in private practice while representing the poor daily in Orleans Parish.

Defendants have been paying the price for a shoddy system for decades, Singer said.

One case Hunter mentioned in his ruling is that of Michael Monroe, 40, a New Orleans man whose beleaguered public defender in 1997 had him stand trial for simple burglary, believing he would face a maximum of seven years if convicted.

Police arrested Monroe on March 20, 1997, at about 2:30 a.m. outside the Pie in the Sky Restaurant on Magazine Street, after finding him climbing out of a window carrying a crowbar in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

"I want to go to jail," he reportedly told officers. But at trial, Monroe testified that he was only passing by the business from his mother's house to his sister's home when officers arrested him.

The owner discovered battered doors and water coolers moved about, but nothing was taken, according to the appeals court record.

Monroe lost at trial, then learned he had lost his freedom for good: Hunter had to sentence him to a mandatory term of life without parole, since he had two prior convictions — burglary and dealing drugs — making him a three-time felon under Louisiana's repeat offender law. Monroe has convictions for violent crime in Orleans Parish.

Powell Miller, a veteran public defender assigned to Hunter's courtroom, said he relied on prosecutors' word that Monroe was looking at seven years. The 4th Circuit Court of Appeal and then the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld the life term.

Miller said he was overworked and under time pressure at the time, and forced to rely on prosecutors for research on his client's record.

The Legislature changed the law after Monroe's case, but decided it would not be applied to past cases. Monroe remains at the State Penitentiary.

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City unveils evacuation plan

By Michelle Krupa
Staff writer

With as many as 25,000 residents expected to need help getting out of New Orleans in advance of a hurricane, city officials on Friday rolled out their most detailed evacuation plan since Katrina, along with a call to city employees to sign up for 400 positions required to put the plan into action.

Under the "City Assisted Evacuation Plan," volunteers — both ordinary citizens and city workers — would begin picking up elderly residents and those who lack transportation about 54 hours, or 2½ days, before

tropical storm-force winds are expected to reach the Louisiana coast. Volunteers also would be responsible for keeping track of where evacuees are sent and helping with pets.

Depending on the storm's severity, the plan calls for Mayor Ray Nagin to enact a citywide mandatory evacuation 30 hours before winds whip up. That's far earlier than Nagin ordered residents to leave the city before Hurricane Katrina. The mayor has been criticized widely by members of Congress and others for waiting until the day before the landmark storm to issue a mandatory evacuation.

As presented Friday, the plan reflects the basic protocol that City Hall planned to enact last year, though the lack of a serious hurricane threat negated any need for it. While some agreements with state and federal authorities still are in the works, the plan generally offers a clearer picture of the process than officials shared in 2006. Col. Jerry Sneed, the city's emergency preparedness director, said officials need 400 people to undertake such duties as assigning residents to buses and keeping track of the destination of their pets, which generally will be evacuated separately from their owners. The number does not include the phalanx of essential emergency workers who man police and fire stations, drainage pump stations and other critical sites.

Last year, the city tried to rely purely on residents to fill the jobs called for in the evacuation plan but got only about 200 volunteers, Sneed said.

Speaking Friday to hundreds of employees from dozens of city departments and agencies, Sneed asked city workers who are not otherwise assigned to emergency jobs to sign up for the evacuation duty, noting that anyone who volunteers would be paid extra as allowed by civil service rules. Employees also would be given rides out of the city well before weather becomes hazardous, he said.

Sneed stressed that the city's plan, outlined to city employees on giant screens, was "difficult at best." The models are strictly guides, he said, though preparing far in advance hopefully will help make the process run smoothly. Hurricane season begins June 1, with the most active part of the season taking place in late summer.

"When you're doing this, it will not be Katrina chaos," Sneed said. "If we do this right, it's controlled. At worst, it will be controlled chaos."

Matt Kallmyer, Sneed's deputy, said he hopes municipal employees will sign up in droves. But he added that the city does not expect them to fill all the vacant ranks.

"We would hope that a majority of it would be city employees, but to pull off something this size, we would need the assistance of the community," he said. "We need people to go ahead and want to help their fellow citizens."

Kallmyer said there has been no talk of requiring city workers who usually do not have to serve during emergencies to report to work against their will.

"No one has said at this point that they would draft employees," he said. "We wouldn't want to force anyone to do that."

Sneed laid out the evacuation strategy during a "Citywide Planning

Day” designed to unite the municipal workforce behind Nagin’s top priorities. Beyond emergency preparedness, the program focused on a recovery blueprint unveiled this week that directs \$1.1 billion of public spending toward inducing private investment across the city, with special attention given to 17 neighborhood redevelopment zones.

Commending them for their hard work over the past 19 months, recovery czar Ed Blakely charged employees to carry word of the plan to “every corner of our city and across the country.”

“You are the message and the messengers of this recovery,” he said during the event at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

Nagin, who addressed the employees briefly, stressed the importance of their effort in the rebuilding.

“This recovery over the next two years is our No. 1 priority,” he said. “The work is not only important to us but to our children and our grandchildren and their children. The history books will be written about you. ... You are history-makers.”

Using hand-held keypads to answer questions that flashed on giant screens, employees weighed in about their personal experiences since Katrina and the challenges they have faced since Nagin laid off about 3,000 City Hall and Sewerage & Water Board workers shortly after the storm.

Of those who participated in a four-hour morning session, 83 percent saw their home damaged, with 48 percent experiencing severe flooding, vote tallies showed. Twenty-four percent suffered the death of a family member or friend in the storm. Sixty-six percent were separated from family during the aftermath, and 35 percent still are living in a temporary home.

As for the workplace, employees — weighing in this time by sending messages from laptop computers — said they are proud to be keeping the city running with fewer employees and resources. They said teamwork and communication among city agencies has improved since Katrina, as has workers’ ability to sympathize with each other.

However, 77 percent said they need more resources to do their jobs well, including people, money and equipment. Seventy-two percent called for better compensation, and 39 percent wanted better working conditions.

Residents interested in volunteering to aid the city-assisted evacuation program can contact City Hall at noep@cityofno.com or (504) 658-8700.

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Georgia company planning to redevelop Mid-City area

By Greg Thomas
Real estate writer

A Georgia development company has been quietly working to

assemble a vast swath of Mid-City, including the Lindy Boggs Medical Center, to create a nearly contiguous 20-acre site for 1.2 million square feet of retail space for national chains that until now have been unable to find a home inside the city.

The site being assembled by Victory Real Estate Investments LLC is huge, covering more than half a square mile from Jefferson Davis Parkway to Carrollton Avenue and from Toulouse to Bienville streets.

A second phase being discussed would involve an additional 9 acres on the lake side of North Carrollton, across the street from Sav-A-Center. Victory owns the Sav-A-Center and the former Winn-Dixie store that was converted into a small Home Depot last year.

The project has been well below the radar, with few city officials aware of it aside from Councilwoman Shelley Midura. Midura has been briefed on the project and is working closely with the Mid-City Neighborhood Organization, which has been playing a behind-the-scenes watchdog role on the development.

"We don't want a suburban-style development plopped in the middle of an urban area," association member Janet Ward Pease said. Several landlords and business owners said they were negotiating with Victory for their warehouses. Most of the properties in the main retail area, between Toulouse and Conti streets, are large 20th-century metal buildings. Landlords and tenants confirmed talking to Victory but wouldn't discuss the project, citing confidentiality agreements or concerns over spoiling negotiations.

There has been no verification that any property, except for Lindy Boggs Medical Center, is under contract.

Neighborhood meeting

Midura said Victory will have to appease the needs and concerns of the neighborhood to gain the slew of approvals that will be necessary, including closing numerous roads between Bienville and Toulouse streets. The area is zoned light industrial, and retail would be considered a better permitted usage under city zoning laws.

Alex Morgan, chief of staff for Midura, said the councilwoman has made it clear that there will be no development unless the concerns of the neighbors are addressed.

At a March 9 presentation by Victory that was open to all association members and neighbors, the company shared its plans, Pease said.

Pease said a Victory representative talked of nearly 900,000 square feet of small and large anchor stores, including an unidentified department store. There would also be an additional 137,000 square feet of smaller retail shops, nearly 50,000 square feet in restaurants and 2,500 surface parking spaces.

The plan also calls for much of the area to include residential units.

Pease said the representative, an attorney for Victory, mentioned possible tenants but said no commitments had been made. But he gave examples including a 190,000-square-foot Target, an 80,000-square-foot Dick's Sporting Goods, an 80,000-square-foot Bed Bath & Beyond, a 50,000-square-foot bookstore and a 27,000-square-foot junior anchor.

Working to shape plans

Jennifer Weishaupt, chairwoman of the association's newly formed economic development committee, said the association became aware of a potential Home Depot or Wal-Mart Supercenter proposed for the Bohn Ford vicinity in November 2005. In January 2006, they discovered the developer was Victory and expressed concerns over the project. They began meeting with Victory President Alton Darby and Vice President Kent Cost about their plans.

She said the association was blunt in telling the executives this go-round that if they "even mention Wal-Mart," the group wasn't going to meet with them about the plans for the 20-acre parcel. The company then showed association members its plans and asked the association to keep the information confidential.

Victory has asked the association to develop a list of what neighbors must have in the development and other things they'd like to see, Weishaupt said. The group met Thursday to begin working on the list.

Victory is also looking at developing the mostly vacant 9 acres across from the Home Depot that includes the former Bohn Ford, three buildings at Toulouse and Carrollton and a small strip center across from Bohn, though Weishaupt has been told that will be considered a second phase of the project.

Bobby Bohn, regional manager for Group 1, which owns the Bohn franchises, did not return several phone calls.

Deal on medical center

Tenet Healthcare Corp. spokesman Stephen Campanini said Tenet is under contract with Victory to sell the medical center, a vast site that stretches between Conti and Bienville streets fronting Jefferson Davis. Weishaupt and other association members say they were told in their meetings with Victory officials that the hospital will be demolished.

Campanini said the deal is expected to close soon, but because it is a pending real estate matter and Tenet is a public company, he couldn't comment on Victory's plans.

He said Cost has confirmed Victory is hoping to wrap up assembling the land in early April.

For several weeks, Darby and Cost have not returned numerous phone calls.

Victory is a national company that owns more than 4.1 million square feet of retail and other commercial space. It buys, develops and manages its properties, and focuses on redevelopment and revitalization of retail areas.

It typically upgrades properties and owns them for a long time rather than selling them after redevelopment.

Victory was involved in the purchase of Belle Promenade mall in Marrero, which it replaced with a Wal-Mart Supercenter in the 1990s.

Victory also owns the Wal-Mart at 8843 Veterans Memorial Blvd. and has purchased a shopping center on Veterans to build a 180,000-

square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter and 30,000 square feet of other retail space. The older Wal-Mart would then close.

Not everyone selling

Property owners who were willing to talk about the Mid-City deal have decided not to sell their properties to Victory.

Ernest Verges, the semi-retired founder of Ernest E. Verges II Architects next to Sav-A-Center, said he was approached early about selling his building, the Mid-City Center.

His firm, now led by his son, will benefit from the project only if it's done right, he said. He's adamant that the character of the small Carrollton shops be maintained.

That's the same philosophy of Joseph "Jay" Fertitta, who bought a 28,000-square-foot building in the 500 block of North Carrollton right after Hurricane Katrina and whose family has lived in Mid-City for a century.

He said he thinks the development will draw stronger tenants to his building — now empty — and that it's critical to keep a mix of national and local retailers on Carrollton. "I think it (the development) is going to be a plus," Fertitta said. "But at the same time we can't allow the nationals to take over. We need someone to keep the neighborhood culture."

Its familiarity with the area has given Victory a head start among national retail developers in making heavy commercial investments in New Orleans, said Richard Stone, vice president and director of marketing and commercial real estate for NAI/Latter & Blum Inc. Realtors.

He added that the odds of attracting top national tenants is increased because of Victory's track record in the area and its vast portfolio.

Storm erases hurdles

Stone said Victory couldn't have picked a better spot, and Katrina is responsible for removing many barriers to entry by national tenants who want to expand from the suburbs into the urban core.

"New Orleans has been on the radar (of national retailers) for a long time," he said, and the storm has made land available.

"Many of these retailers have wanted in, but now will have to weigh the opportunity to get into the market along with the post-Katrina uncertainties. I think some of these nationals will jump" to participate in Victory's plans, Stone said.

"Some recognize there is a window of opportunity to stake out some of the more desirable sites that never would have been available were it not for the storm."

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West Bank levee board demands \$1.4 million from East Bank counterpart

**By Meghan Gordon
West Bank bureau**

On the same day it approved its first set of budgets, the West Bank levee board demanded Friday that its regional east bank counterpart release about \$1.4 million collected in Algiers so it could put the money to use maintaining and improving levees that protect the residents who paid the property taxes.

The request foreshadows major clashes yet to spring from last year's levee board consolidation, which gave the New Orleans Levee District three bosses but didn't specify how the state Division of Administration and the two new regional levee boards would manage the single district.

While acknowledging the legal quagmire, the West Bank board passed a resolution to put on the record its reading of the law: that it has the authority to manage all taxes for levees paid by West Bank residents, whether they're collected in Jefferson or Orleans parishes.

"They're improperly holding our money over there and we've got to get it and manage it," said Owen Bordelon, a staff attorney for the West Jefferson Levee District who has advised the new authority during its first spate of meetings since the board convened in February. Board member Michael Merritt said he worried the Algiers property taxes would get spent on the east bank priorities. The Algiers revenue amounted to about \$1.4 million for each of the last two years, James Bollinger, comptroller for the New Orleans levee district, told the board.

Board President David Bindewald called the resolution the first step in managing the West Bank portion of the New Orleans levee district.

"Over the long haul there are many, many, many issues to resolve," he said.

Tom Jackson, president of the east bank regional authority, said his board had no power to split the revenue from the New Orleans Levee District's account and direct it to the West Bank board.

"It's a very complex issue and it's not worked out," he said. "I'll have no response to the resolution. ... I'm sure my board will have no response to it."

Jackson said the Legislature would have to find a solution to the conflicts that arise from three governing bodies attempting to manage a single entity.

Moreover, Jackson said the resolution assumes that the money exists in a separate account within the New Orleans Levee District's budget.

"Algiers is not split out as its own entity anymore than the downtown area or the lakefront area or the Broadmoor district," he said.

The West Bank board confronted another frustration Friday related to Algiers' new status in the levee authority reform, when it struggled to create a quorum because Algiers members can't vote on most matters.

A fourth voting member eventually returned to the dais, allowing the West Bank board to approve budgets for the tail end of this fiscal year, which ends June 30, and another for the fiscal year that starts in July.

Absent members included Kerwin Julian of Algiers, who wouldn't have been able to vote, and Johannes Westerink of South Bend, Ind.

The Legislature committed \$500,000 per year for the regional board to spend on operations, with a one-time payment of \$250,000 from the board's inception to the first full fiscal year.

Within the \$250,000 budget that carries the board through June, it expects to spend \$60,000, or about a quarter of the budget, on salaries and benefits; \$48,000, or about 19 percent, on consultants and contractors; \$30,000, or about 12 percent, on commissioners' per diem payments and \$40,000, or about 16 percent, on public official liability policies.

The budget approved for fiscal 2008 holds similar priorities. It allocates \$150,000, or 30 percent, to salaries and benefits; \$85,000, or about 17 percent, to consultants and contractors; \$70,000, or about 14 percent to commissioners' for per diem payments; and \$45,000, or about 9 percent to liability policies.

The board also approved the West Jefferson Levee District's \$3.1 million budget that runs from July through June 2008.

It assumes the district would collect \$3 million in 2007 property taxes, even though board leaders believe they can't collect the millage unless they called a new millage election or they succeed in tweaking the legislation to allow them to collect the old board's millage.

The West Jefferson district plans to spend the bulk of its budget on personnel, including \$1.3 million, or 42 percent of the budget, on salaries, overtime and insurance benefits; \$325,000, or 10 percent, on public official liability policies; and \$180,000, or 6 percent, on retirement contributions.

Simply voting on the three budgets proved a headache for the reformed board, because of restrictions on its Algiers members. The state law calls them "nonvoting members" and permits them only to have a say on levee projects that include New Orleans.

That meant Algiers resident Robert Howson sat out the budget votes, leaving the four other present members to barely create a quorum — until Mark Morgan headed to the bathroom during the time allotted to public comments.

With no citizens to address the board, the other members had to wait for Morgan's return before taking the votes.

"This is the perfect example of what I was saying last week," said Susan Maclay, pointing to Howson. "If Bob was a voting member, we wouldn't be in this predicament."

Short of a legislative revision that the board hopes to secure, Bindewald proposed a more immediate solution.

"Could everybody go to the bathroom before the meeting?" he said.

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Archbishop Hannan suffers a stroke, expected to fully recover

By Bruce Nolan
Staff writer

Archbishop Philip Hannan suffered a stroke Friday morning and is hospitalized but expected to make a full recovery, the Archdiocese of New Orleans said.

Hannan, 93, was stricken at his residence at St. Joseph Abbey in Covington, said the Rev. William Maestri, the archdiocese's spokesman.

He was taken to an undisclosed hospital, where treatment was begun.

"He's responding well to therapy and we're looking forward to his return to active ministry. We've been told to anticipate a full recovery," said Maestri.

"Basically, we're in a holding pattern."

Maestri said it was not yet clear how long Hannan will be hospitalized. He declined to disclose Hannan's location. "We believe the archbishop should get rest and quiet, and we also think (public attention) might affect other patients. We want to respect his privacy, and theirs."

Maestri declined to say what Hannan's early symptoms were. "We don't want to get into the medical particulars on that." But he said doctors said the archbishop's prognosis is good.

"We ask the prayers of the people of the archdiocese because the archbishop has meant so much to so many, not only to Catholics," said Maestri.

Hannan served as archbishop from 1965 to 1989, and has remained active in Catholic broadcasting since his retirement.

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Bush appointee won't run for St. Tammany office again

St. Tammany Parish Councilwoman Pat Brister of Mandeville confirmed this week that she has decided not to seek re-election to her third term next fall.

Brister said her appointed position with the U.S. State Department is requiring more of her time and energies than originally anticipated.

A year ago, President Bush appointed Brister as the country's ambassador to the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women, an international panel that promotes worldwide women's rights in political, social, civil and educational fields.

The Senate confirmed her appointment in June. Since then, the job

has meant extensive worldwide travel for Brister. And although there's no guarantee that Brister will continue serving as ambassador after President Bush steps down in early 2009, she said she wants to devote her full attention to the position.

Brister, a former chairwoman of the Republican Party in Louisiana, said she has no plans to run for any other office and will not be involved in the October election to determine the new council member for the district.

She said she decided not to run last week and has quietly been telling friends and associates about her decision.

Her decision means there will be at least three open seats on the council next fall. Parish Council Chairman Barry Bagert of Slidell has announced he will not seek re-election to the 9th District seat he's held since 1984 and Russell Fitzmorris of the Covington area has said he will not seek a third term in the 2nd District.

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Several items on Saturday's ballot in St. Tammany

Voters in parts of St. Tammany Parish will go to the polls Saturday to decide municipal elections in Covington and Sun, the race for a new 7th District parish councilman and a tax renewal for a Folsom-area recreation district.

Only 21,530 of the parish's 145,326 registered voters are eligible to cast a ballot in the election, parish Registrar of Voters M. Dwayne Wall said.

Although most of the St. Tammany voters eligible to go the polls will see only one item on the ballot, Wall said he expects a 25 to 30 percent turnout.

He said that estimate is based on the 177 early ballots cast for the elections.

Polling places will open at 6 a.m. and close at 8 p.m. for the 33 precincts involved in the election.

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River accident involves paddleboat, barge

2:18 p.m., Friday

By Jaquetta White
Business writer

A paddleboat carrying about 160 passengers collided with a tugboat pushing five barges carrying methanol on the Mississippi River this morning.

No one aboard the 719-foot River Explorer or the tug was injured. The boat was damaged and is taking on water through a hole near the water line in its hull.

The water is being pumped out. Passengers are still aboard the vessel, which was returning to New Orleans after a week-long trip, and will remain there until the Coast Guard determines whether boat can safely sail to port.

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Damaged trees to be removed from St. Tammany roadsides

St. Tammany bureau

Contracts have been awarded to remove 2,102 Katrina-damaged trees that pose a public safety threat along St. Tammany Parish roadways, parish officials said Friday.

The damaged trees are in the rights of way for parish roads north of U.S. 190, officials said.

To seek bids on the project, parish officials divided the work into three geographical areas.

Stranco, Inc. was the lowest bidder in two of the areas and Louisiana Landscape Specialty was the lowest bidder in the remaining area. The total cost for the project is \$210,925, officials said.

Work is expected to begin Monday.

Damaged trees south of U.S. 190 are being removed under a separate FEMA contract.

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Body found in Gretna Friday morning

West Bank bureau

The Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office is awaiting autopsy results for a man whose body was found beside a street in Gretna Friday.

The man's body was found in the 100 block of Friedrichs Road about 11:45 a.m., said Col. John Fortunato of the Sheriff's Office, which is listing it as an unclassified death pending the autopsy.

"There were no apparent signs of the cause of death," Fortunato said, adding there were "no signs of foul play at this point."

The man, whose identity was not released, lived in the area in which he was found, Fortunato said. He was 46 years old, authorities said.

It was not immediately known who found the man's body.

Anyone with information about the death is asked to call the Sheriff's Office investigations bureau at (504) 364-5300.

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Police at scene of Algiers shooting

New Orleans police are investigating a shooting at Homer and Vallette streets in Algiers. The incident was reported after 1 p.m. Authorities have several suspects in custody.

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City releases weekly update of recovery progress

The following is an update on the progress of the recovery of core city services in New Orleans. Updates can be found on the city's website at www.cityofno.com in the Community On One Page.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

Week ending 3/30/ This year

Potholes repaired 957/19,104

Storm drains cleaned 915/4,141

Street lights repaired 353/4,541

Street signs replaced 0/3,636

Street signs repaired 0/407

Total footage of drain lines cleaned NA/758,987

DEPARTMENT OF SANITATION

Week ending 3/30/ Total

Trash cart registration 9,000/ 71,000

Trash carts delivered 6,000/62,000

* The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has completed approximately 98% of debris removal (not including demolition and reconstruction)

* Citizens drop off sites:

-- Crowder Road (Crowder at I-10)

-- 2829 Elysian Fields Avenue

* To date, A total of 17.01 million cubic yards of hurricane-related debris have been removed from the city

* A total of 38,672 cubic yards of tornado cleanup debris have been removed

DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND PARKWAYS

* The Moor Group, a contractual organization, began grass cutting on Monday, March 26; The group will cut 500 acres of the city's 2,000 acres of green space

* Volunteers from Operation Nehemiah began cutting Del Mar Village Playground, Dibenedetto Playground and Kerry Curley Playground

* Able Tree Service completed the removal of 130 tree stumps on Fleur DeLis and Old Hammond Hwy. Currently, Able Tree is lifting 128 Live Oak trees on Fleur de Lis.

* Hoover Tree Service completed tree stump removal on portions of Paris Ave; 145 were removed

* Hoover Tree also removed 112 tree stumps, most of which are large Magnolias, on Elysian Fields Ave

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Pleasure vessel, tug collide in Mississippi River

A pleasure vessel with approximately 160 passengers collided with a tugboat on the Mississippi River near St. Charles/Jefferson Parish line Friday morning, causing damage to the vessel, but no injuries.

There were no injuries and no one in the water, officials said.

The collision between the 719-foot River Explorer and the 130-foot tug James E. Nevin occurred shortly after 10 a.m., said Coast Guard spokesman Lt. Derek Beatty.

Te River Explorer was damaged and taking on water through a hole near the water line, officials said.

"The vessel's pumping system is keeping up with the inflow of water," said Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Tom Atkeson.

The tug was carrying eight people, the Coast Guard said.

"We got lucky on this one," Lt. Sean Moore said. "There was a potential for 170 people swimming in the Mississippi River."

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Local labor market improving, figures show

12:55 p.m., Friday

The local labor market strengthened in February when both the total number of jobs available and the total number of people working posted gains.

According to figures released this morning by the Louisiana Department of Labor, the total number of nonfarm jobs available in the seven-parish metro area climbed to 496,200 in February, up from 495,900 in January and 456,300 in February of 2006.

The total number of people employed climbed to 473,210 in February, up from 471,938 in January and 447,975 in February of 2006.

"This is part of hurricane recovery. Plus it's also part of a seasonal pattern in that one reason why employment increased over the month

was because of employment increasing at the colleges and universities as the new semester started," said labor market specialist Patty Lopez.

The educational and health services sector significantly increased the number of jobs it offers. The number of jobs in that sector climbed to 59,800 in February, up from 59,100 in January and 52,900 in February of 2006.

The transportation, financial and government sectors also posted gains over the year and the month.

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Orleans public defender system "a mockery," judge says

By Gwen Filosa
Staff writer

The public defender system in Orleans Parish is a "mockery" of what a criminal justice system must provide in a civilized nation, a judge said Friday as he vowed to no longer appoint the program to represent poor defendants in court.

Orleans Parish Criminal District Court Judge Arthur Hunter said that next month he will release 42 poor defendants who remain in custody, and suggested the public defender program should dump cases rather than continue working on them while it has only a skeleton staff, a staggering caseload and a lack of money.

Hunter, a former police officer elected to the bench in 1996, blamed lawmakers for the failure of the public defender system and pointed out that the crisis plaguing poor defendants and their court-appointed lawyers has existed for a quarter century.

"The Louisiana Legislature has allowed this legal hell to exist, fester and finally boil over," Hunter said Friday, ruling from the bench that the poorest defendants in New Orleans are receiving the worst legal services as they face prison time. "This court must take certain measures to protect the statutory and constitutional rights of indigent defendants. Hurricane Katrina is no longer an excuse, and the state has a budget surplus."

Hunter's ruling isn't final until April 18, the date he scheduled for the district attorney's office and public defender program to present additional testimony and facts.

Steve Singer, chief of trials for the public defender program, said that \$2.1 million would suffice to properly staff a post-Katrina office. That would be about one-third more than the office currently has, Singer said.

To date, the public defender program has 26 full-time attorneys working at the criminal district court, and a growing caseload that stands at about 2,524 felony cases.

Christine Lehmann, an attorney for the public defender program who filed the motion Hunter ruled upon Friday, said for decades the criminal district court has valued "speed over accuracy."

"It shouldn't be analogous to a shoe factory, but to a hospital,"

Lehmann said after the ruling. "These are people's lives."

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Abita Springs creates town marshal position

By Bruce Hamilton
St. Tammany bureau

Abita Springs officials created the position of town marshal in a special meeting Thursday evening and gave the mayor authority to seek state loans and grants for expansion of the town's sewer system.

The Board of Aldermen also approved a \$21,300 contract to remove more than 50 dead pine trees from town property. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has refused to cover the cost, saying the beetle infestation that damaged trees was not a direct result of Hurricane Katrina.

Last week, aldermen voted 4-1 to table the town marshal ordinance. Members of the board said they unanimously supported the new position, but the four who delayed the measure's adoption said they wanted to clarify its language. The board then voted to set Thursday's special meeting to finish the job.

On Thursday, Mayor Louis Fitzmorris said the details had been ironed out. "When all's said and done I think we ended up with a better product," he said of the ordinance. The mayor said despite agreement about the job's duties, "putting on paper in the right, proper, legal way" became a slight snag.

Alderman Greg Lemons, one of the four who had voted to table the ordinance, said, "I'm pretty confident we did our due diligence on this." The ordinance passed unanimously. The mayor introduced Joseph Candilora of Bush as the top candidate for the job at last week's meeting. He is expected to be hired at the town's April 17 meeting.

The town marshal position essentially replaces the former chief of police job, with duties oriented more toward enforcement of non-criminal laws. As a code enforcement officer, he will have authority over building, subdivision and other zoning rules.

The marshal also will serve as the town's liaison to the Sheriff's Office and bailiff for mayor's court, with further duties to be specified as needed by resolution of the board. The position was created with an hourly pay of \$12.50.

In other business, board passed a resolution that authorizes the mayor to submit a pre-application to the state Department of Environmental Quality, which will put expansion of the sewage treatment plant and extension of its sewer lines on a priority list for funding.

The tree-removal contract was awarded to Earl Gregory. Some of the most dangerous ones threatening residential areas already have been removed, town officials said, and the other dead trees have been marked. Fitzmorris noted that the town is liable for whatever damage the trees cause.

IPS and Southern pine beetles damaged trees throughout St.

Tammany Parish, leading to some hazards related to dangling limbs or leaning trees. Many attributed the effect to Hurricane Katrina, reasoning that the trees were weakened by the storm and thus making them more vulnerable to attack from the beetles.

But FEMA declined to reimburse Abita Springs for the trees' removal. "We just have to bite the bullet and do it," Fitzmorris said, noting that the town budgeted \$25,000 for the task. "I still feel this was hurricane-related."

(Bruce Hamilton can be reached at bhamilton@timespicayune.com or (985)898-4827.)

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Old Arabi trash sweep Saturday

A trash and debris sweep of Old Arabi is planned for Saturday. Volunteers are needed.

Volunteers will begin at the river levee at Angela Avenue at 9 a.m. and work their way toward St. Claude. Other streets will also be targeted if enough volunteers show up.

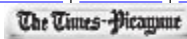
Volunteers should bring gloves and trash bags. Pickup trucks are also needed.

Call 277-0106 for more information.

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