



St. Charles Parish applies for permit for second phase of west bank hurricane levee

By Matt Scallan, The Times-Picayune
February 18, 2010



'Until we have an alignment, we can't ask anyone for money,' St. Charles Parish President V.J. St. Pierre Jr. said.

After more than a decade of negotiation with state and federal agencies, St. Charles Parish has applied for a permit for the second phase of a west bank hurricane protection levee.

The parish and the Army Corps of Engineers have been discussing the proposed alignment for the 9,500-foot-long second phase of the project for years. A levee to protect the parish's vulnerable west bank from hurricane storm surges has been a longtime goal of parish government and was the major issue in the 2007 parish elections.

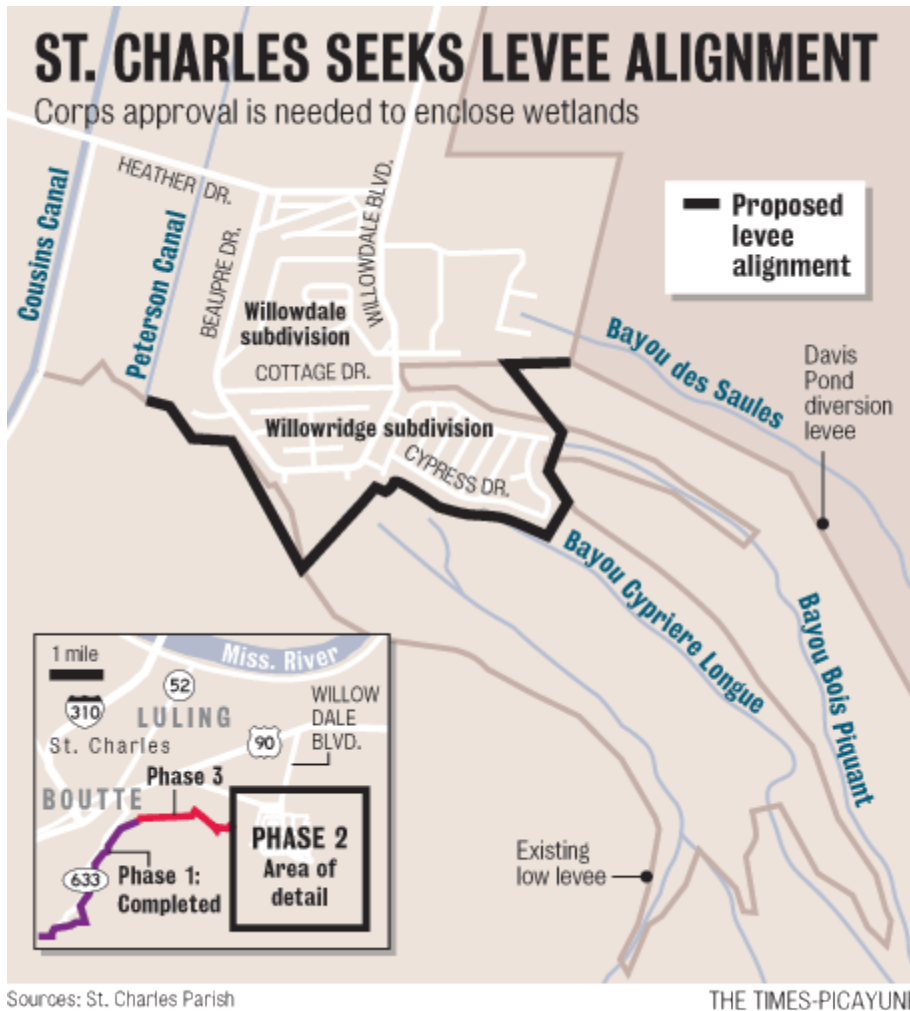
The second phase is part of a proposed 10-mile-long levee that would stretch from the Paradis Canal to the Davis Pond Diversion Canal. The project will probably cost in the neighborhood of \$150 million, including the construction of three pump stations.

Since the project isn't part of the area's federal levee system, Parish President V.J. St. Pierre Jr. said the parish must find other ways to finance it.

"Until we have an alignment, we can't ask anyone for money," he said.

The proposed alignment for phase 2 of the project wraps a 7-foot-high levee around the Willowdale subdivision in Luling. The proposed project also includes a drainage canal and

retention area on the dry side of the levee, and a pump station to move the water over the levee.



The project's third phase would link a previously-completed section of the levee between the Paradis Canal and Boutte.

The second phase would enclose 27 acres of wetlands near the Davis Pond Diversion canal and another 23 acres of retention area south of the intersection of Willowdale Boulevard and Beauvre Drive.

The route of that section of levee has been the thorniest obstacle to completing the project.

The major point of contention has been the amount of undeveloped land to include inside the levee. The parish's proposed alignment cuts through the Rathborne Land Co.'s proposed 80-acre Willowridge 6 development.

The parish and the company have been negotiating over the value of the land for the past two years. Former Parish President Albert Laque's administration had proposed that the planned development would be enclosed by the levee, an idea that met resistance from federal regulators.

Rathborne Vice-President Greg Lier said the company isn't happy about the latest proposed alignment.

"We had hoped to have the parish use the land as a conservation area, which would have allowed us to recoup our development costs. Now, they're going to have to build a very large pump station and dredge a deep lake."

The company also wants to ensure that the alignment doesn't cause drainage problems for its other properties in the area, Lier said.

St. Pierre said he hopes to reach an agreement with the company about the purchase price soon. But if a deal can't be reached, St. Pierre said he would ask the Lafourche Basin Levee District to perform a "quick take" expropriation of the land, which would allow construction to begin immediately. A court would determine the fair market value of the land later.

"We want to pay them fair market value. We just have to determine what that is," he said. "If we have to go to court, it will take 10 years for them to get their money,"

Another hurdle involves obtaining U.S. Justice Department approval for building across a conservation easement south of Willowdale's southern tip, the intersection of Cypress Drive and Choctaw Drive.

The parish is currently banned from developing the area, which was made a conservation area under a 1999 federal settlement with Rathborne to resolve allegations of unpermitted development of wetlands.

Still, parish officials say they believe the project will get the green light soon.

"Before, we had a lot more resistance," Parish Councilman Terry Authement said. "We had to do a lot of re-engineering and prove things to them, but I now, feel like the federal agencies are working with us, not against us."