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Associated Press

Update 4: Feds to Rebuild New Orleans Levees

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President Bush is requesting \$1.5 billion more to help make the levee system in New Orleans stronger than it was before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast.

At a news briefing at the White House, officials dodged the question of whether the levees would be built to withstand a Category 5 hurricane, using broader language instead to promise that the city's citizens would be safe and the levees would be "stronger and better."

"The federal government is committed to building the best levee system known in the world," Donald Powell, the top U.S. official for reconstruction, told reporters. "It's a complicated issue."

The money the president is requesting is in addition to the \$1.6 billion he has already

committed to repair the breeches in the levees, correct the design and construction flaws and bring the levee to a height that was authorized before the hurricane, a Category 4 storm, hit on Aug. 29, killing more than 1,300 people.

"That work is being done as we speak," Powell said.

The additional \$1.5 billion that the president is requesting would pay to armor the levee system with concrete and stone, close three interior canals and provide state-of-the-art pumping systems so that the water would flow out of the canals into Lake Pontchartrain, Powell said.

Officials said the levee system would be rebuilt to its previous level of protection before the hurricane season next year, and that the process of strengthening them further would take two years.


The announcement came after Bush met in the Oval Office with Powell, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, the head of the Army Corps of Engineers, and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

Louisiana officials say that bringing the levees to Category 5 level is crucial to the future of New Orleans, as it would be hard otherwise to entice the many people displaced by the storm to come back.

"We understand that the people of New Orleans need to be assured that they will safe when they get back home - that their city has an infrastructure that is capable of sustaining a possible storm next season or in the seasons afterwards," Chertoff said.

Bush's public schedule in recent weeks has been almost completely bare of references to Katrina or appearances related to the disaster. But Chertoff said the attention at the federal level has not faded.

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"Not a day goes by that we don't think about what's going on in New Orleans and what we can do to promote the process of reconstruction and recovery for the people who have been afflicted all over the Gulf Coast," Chertoff said. "We continue to do everything we can to help communities get back on their feet."

Nagin thanked Americans for the money to rebuild New Orleans and told former residents of the city to come home.

"It's time for you to come back to the Big Easy," he said. "This action today says come home to New Orleans."

Nagin said the levee system will be stronger than ever. Officials said the levee system would be rebuilt to its previous level of protection before the hurricane season next year, and that the process of strengthening them further would take two years.

"These levees will be as high as 17 feet in some areas. We've never had that," he said. "We will have the holy trinity of recovery - levees, housing and incentives."

Nagin acknowledged that the most heavily devastated areas of the city - Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward - were not ready for returning residents, but he promised they would be eventually. He suggested that officials may need to find housing elsewhere in the city in the meantime.

"At the end of the day, our entire city will be rebuilt," he said.

On Capitol Hill, meantime, Senate tax-writers embraced the casinos, golf courses and liquor stores as part of a roughly \$7 billion program of tax incentives to rebuild Gulf Coast businesses damaged or destroyed by hurricanes.

The Senate could act as soon as Thursday on a package of tax breaks and other assistance that fulfills Bush's call for a special business zone in the Gulf Coast. Lawmakers hurried to finish the bill before taking a holiday break. The House earlier had denied including the casino and other businesses in the tax relief.

The House last week passed its own package of aid. Its key benefits matched the Senate and included increased write-offs for small business investments and an additional write-offs for other businesses purchasing equipment and new property.

1 of 1

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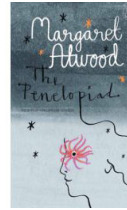
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