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## Louisiana Sees Faded Urgency in Relief Effort

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By [JAMES DAO](#)

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BATON ROUGE, La., Nov. 18 - Less than three months after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, relief legislation remains dormant in Washington and despair is growing among officials here who fear that Congress and the Bush administration are losing interest in their plight.

As evidence, the state and local officials cite an array of stalled bills and policy changes they say are crucial to rebuilding the city and persuading some of its hundreds of thousands of evacuated residents to return, including measures to finance long-term hurricane protection, revive small businesses and compensate the uninsured.

"There is a real concern that we will lose the nation's attention the longer this takes," said Representative Bobby Jindal, a Republican from Metairie, just west of New Orleans. "People are making decisions now about whether

to come back. And every day that passes, it will be a little harder to get things done."

Officials from both parties say the bottlenecks have occurred in large part because of a leadership vacuum in Washington, where President Bush and Congress have been preoccupied for weeks with Iraq, deficit reduction, the C.I.A. leak investigation and the Supreme Court.

Congressional leaders have been scrambling to rein in spending, and many in Washington have grumbled that [Louisiana's](#) leaders have asked for too much, while failing to guarantee that the money will be spent efficiently and honestly.

By contrast, many say, Washington's response to the Sept. 11 attacks seemed more focused and sustained.

Now, with the holiday season days away and the 2006 midterm elections just around the bend, many Louisiana officials say they fear the sense of urgency that spurred action in September is swiftly draining away.

Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, a Democrat, said recently on CNN, "We feel like we are citizens of the United States who are nearly forgotten."

Walter Isaacson, vice chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, drew a parallel between the governmental dithering in the immediate aftermath of the flood and the current situation, saying a lack of action now would be devastating to New Orleans's economy.

"It's like when FEMA wasn't really that creative, and the water was rising and people were stranded," Mr. Isaacson said, referring to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Once again, people are being stranded and businesses are starting to die."

But Donald Powell, who began work this week as President Bush's liaison for the reconstruction effort, said that while the sense of urgency might have faded somewhat, "The president is committed to rebuilding the Gulf Coast."

Few people in Congress are openly threatening to block money for reconstruction. More typical are sotto voce mumblings about whether federal money will be squandered through incompetence or graft by Louisiana officials. And some lawmakers have openly wondered whether each neighborhood in New Orleans needs to be rebuilt and protected with expensive floodwalls.

Senator Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, raised concerns about Congressional commitment to New Orleans when he said during a tour of the city that Alaskan towns damaged by storms were often relocated. Mr. Stevens also warned that the spate of recent natural disasters meant that Louisiana might not receive money as swiftly as it would like.

He said later that his words had been misunderstood, and colleagues said he had spoken movingly to Republican Senators about the devastation he had witnessed. Still, such comments prompted The Times-Picayune of New Orleans to publish an editorial on Nov. 13 titled "Forgotten Already."

"There was an emergency window of opportunity in September that is basically closed," said Ron Faucheux, a vice president of the American Institute of Architects, who is lobbying for reconstruction measures in Washington. "What's needed is to pry open that window again."

Louisiana officials credit Mr. Bush with pushing bills through Congress after the hurricane that provided \$62 billion for storm recovery, much of which has not been spent. And they applauded his appointment of Mr. Powell, a former banker and chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

[On Saturday, Governor Blanco also announced that the Bush administration had agreed to continue paying 100 percent for certain storm relief services, including debris removal, until Jan. 15.]

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But in recent weeks, Louisiana officials say, the administration has been less forceful on recovery measures. "We're still relying on the president's promise to help New Orleans rebuild," said Mr. Isaacson, referring to Mr. Bush's Sept. 15 pledge that the federal government "will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives."

Mr. Isaacson added, "I think we need a push from the president himself" to get federal financing for major projects.

In some cases the administration is even blocking action sought by Louisiana officials, those officials assert. The most significant of those measures, lawmakers from both parties say, is a bipartisan Senate bill that would authorize \$450 million in bridge loans and grants to hurricane-damaged businesses.

The bill, whose sponsors include Senator Olympia J. Snowe, Republican of Maine, would also allow businesses to defer payments on federal loans and would increase the size of disaster loans.

Though a similar package of benefits was approved after the Sept. 11 attacks, the Small Business Administration has opposed the new Senate bill as too costly. Mr. Isaacson said the bill would not pass without White House intervention. "The winds have shifted against us," he said.

Ms. Snowe, chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, has also chastised the S.B.A. for the slow processing of 250,000 disaster loan applications, which has created a four-month backlog. The agency said it was trying to hire 1,000 new processors, but Ms. Snowe called its response "sluggish" and "confused."

"They'll tell you it is an unprecedented disaster, but they won't muster an unprecedented response," she said. "We should have moved heaven and earth to get this done."

Louisiana officials have also complained about opposition from the Bush administration to proposals to dedicate a stream of money for restoring coastal wetlands and constructing levees capable of withstanding Category 5 hurricanes.

Though that work will take years to complete, a federal commitment to provide money - more than \$20 billion - is needed soon to encourage insurance companies, businesses and homeowners to invest in the region, state officials say.

But the Bush administration has objected to a bipartisan proposal that would give the state up to 40 percent of the more than \$5 billion in annual federal revenues generated by Louisiana's offshore oil and gas industries. The state now receives only a small portion of those royalties.

"The political will is there in Congress to do this," said Senator Mary L. Landrieu, Democrat of Louisiana and a strong advocate of the oil revenue plan. "We have to get leadership from the White House. Their tight-fisted policies are cutting off their nose to spite their face."

Mr. Powell said that the administration was committed to flood protection and that a compromise on the royalties issue was possible. "It's very important that people feel like the region is safe when they move back," he said.

Many Louisiana officials acknowledge that some problems in Washington stem from the widespread perception that state and local governments here are rife with inefficiency and corruption.

Governor Blanco has tried to counter that image by pushing measures in the Legislature that would allow the state to take over failing schools in New Orleans, oversee levee construction now handled by patronage-filled levee boards, and cut state spending by nearly \$600 million.

The state has hired the large accounting firm Deloitte & Touche to oversee the spending of federal relief money, and has promised to crack down on any cases of corruption. Another accounting group, UHY, was hired to monitor Deloitte.

Louisiana officials also acknowledge that some problems have been self-inflicted, starting with a \$250 billion relief package introduced by Senator Landrieu and Senator David Vitter, a Republican, in September. The package was ridiculed by many in Congress as unrealistically expensive.

Representative Jindal said House Republicans had taken a more "rifle-shot" approach of trying to pass bills addressing specific issues.

For example, Representative Richard H. Baker, a Republican from Baton Rouge, has introduced legislation to create a corporation authorized to issue bonds to buy destroyed properties. The corporation would sell the properties to developers. Former owners would then have the first right to buy refurbished properties. Governor Blanco and Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans have endorsed the bill.

But many people in Louisiana remain concerned that there are too many voices in Washington pushing different proposals, while fundamental issues remain unresolved.

"People want government to speak with one voice," said Keith Villere, a town planner from St. Tammany Parish, just north of New Orleans. "If they don't unite, the federal government will forget about St. Tammany. They'll forget about New Orleans. And they'll forget about Katrina, just like they forgot about the tsunami."

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