

# THE COURIER

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## EDITORIAL

# Louisiana wasted an opportunity

The personal, economic and environmental tolls exacted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 were obvious to most of us.

Far too many of us were personally touched by these tragic storms.

Even those who escaped the worst of the damage themselves were confronted day after day with the touching and compelling images of misery that affected others.

While nothing could undo the death and destruction the Gulf Coast's

people experienced during those storms, people here could take a small bit of comfort in the outpouring of sympathy and support coming from the rest of the nation.

On that wave of sympathy came a host of federal actions aimed at preventing future tragedies like Katrina and Rita from ever happening again. Part of that effort was a tremendous amount of money aimed at raising homes to keep them out of future

floodwaters.

A federal audit now claims that as much as \$700 million that was meant to help 24,000 Louisiana people elevate their homes could have been misspent.

The audit, released Wednesday, said the state kept poor records of how the money was used and whether the homeowners who got \$30,000 grants used the money as it was intended.

The audit has focused some national attention on making sure there are tighter controls in place to keep tabs on how relief money for Superstorm Sandy is spent in the Northeast.

Of greater concern to Louisiana, though, should be the fact that the bad press is another black eye on our national reputation — particularly coming as this does in relation to national action meant to help us.

Coastal residents have long known that the key to our future viability will be a dedicated, sustained federal determination to support flood protection and coastal restoration. One of the flood-protection measures that will be crucial to our efforts will be home elevations.

In no part of our dealings with the federal government can Louisiana afford to squander the rare goodwill and assistance we do happen to receive.

Louisiana's shameful political past — which is more colorful but probably no more crooked than that of other states — has left us with a legacy of distrust from some around the nation and in Washington, D.C.

Stories like the audit are uncommon, but it doesn't take much to reinforce a negative stereotype, even one that is unfair and unrealistic.

The federal government must take aggressive action to make sure storm-relief money is spent efficiently and properly, so the current interest in Sandy money is understandable and laudable.

Unfortunately, the audit results could make things even more difficult for our region, which has had to stubbornly fight for even the small bits of help we have received.

In that way, this was just another wasted opportunity.

*Editorials represent the opinions of the newspaper, not of any individual.*

# OPINION



# Brace yourself for a knockout



KEITH MAGILL  
 EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Terrebonne and Lafourche residents should prepare themselves to make the kind of heart-wrenching decisions their neighbors to the east are now confronting.

Thousands of home and business owners can expect flood-insurance prices to rise to outrageously unaffordable levels. The choices:

■ Pay costs that in some of the lowest-lying areas could exceed \$20,000 a year for a flood-insurance policy. Even those who live in less-risky areas could see major increases, with insurance policies that now cost a few hundred dollars a year rising to a few thousand dollars a year.

■ Pay tens of thousands of dollars to elevate, though even after that, people who live in some of the highest-risk areas would still have to pay intolerable flood-insurance costs.

■ Go without flood insurance and face the prospect of losing everything you own, with no insurance money to rebuild, to the next flood or hurricane storm surge.

■ Move to higher ground, wherever that might end up being after FEMA releases its new flood-risk maps for Louisiana's coastal parishes. But first, face the prospect that your home, the one you'll need to sell to get the money you'll need to move, will be rendered almost worthless because skyrocketing flood-insurance prices will push down property values and make things just as difficult for someone who might consider buying it.

Residents are already confronting this grim future in St. Charles, Plaquemines, Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes, where FEMA, which runs the National Flood Insurance Program, is rolling out the new maps. I've been following media reports of the public hearings where residents are coming to grips with the magnitude of what lies ahead. Here, as reported by the New Orleans Times-Picayune, is a sampling of reactions at a March 25 hearing in Des Allemands, right across the border from Lafourche:

■ "They should call this death to Des Allemands," Bayou Gauche resident Charles Boyer II said after reviewing the maps and their effects

on insurance prices.

■ "My whole life savings is gone," said Annie Knuppel, of Des Allemands, whose home, three feet off the ground, is still four feet below base flood elevation under the new maps. "I pay \$350 now. They told me I'll have to pay \$15,000. That means either foreclosure or bankruptcy for me. And my parents — my daddy's house is 3 feet under now. ... He's in hospice dying of cancer, they're living on fixed income with no savings, and now they're going to lose their house, too."

■ "These maps will benefit some, but devastate — not hurt, devastate — others to the point where people will lose their houses," said St. Charles Parish Councilman Paul J. Hogan, whose district includes some of the hardest hit areas along the west bank of the Mississippi River. "People with mortgages will have to pay \$20,000 per year. The banks will foreclose on these houses, and these areas will become ghost towns."

These heart-breaking realizations are destined to impact thousands of residents in Terrebonne and Lafourche, where local officials say they expect the maps to be released later this year.

Residents have known the maps were coming for years. They will replace maps that haven't been updated since the mid-1980s, and parish officials have spent months disputing some of the elevation calculations on which they are based.

But the maps are only the left jab of a devastating two-pronged blow. The right hook — the knockout punch — is called the Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Reform and Modernization Act of 2012. Its goal is to put the National Flood Insurance Program on solid financial footing. The pro-

gram has run up an estimated \$27 billion debt since Hurricane Katrina and subsequent storms, and officials estimate it takes in only 70 cents for every dollar it pays out in property-damage claims.

Before it was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama, FEMA had planned to allow anyone who already had flood insurance when the new maps took effect to keep paying the lower rates that are now subsidized by U.S. taxpayers. But the new law, which takes effect later this year, will eliminate such "grandfathering" for people who live in the most flood-prone areas.

Where those areas will be in Terrebonne and Lafourche, and how high insurance prices will rise for home and business owners there, is impossible to determine until FEMA releases the new maps to the public. But if what is happening just to the east is any indication, areas south of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway would be the most likely to see the biggest rate hikes.

Add to those blows a kick below the belt: The Army Corps of Engineers rates none of the levees in Terrebonne or Lafourche parishes as hurricane protection under the stricter standards enacted after Katrina in 2005. So FEMA is crafting the maps as if the levees don't exist. That decision raises the flood risk significantly in most of the two parishes, exacerbating the skyrocketing prices residents will soon face.

All of this poses grave consequences for every single person who lives and works in Terrebonne and Lafourche, across south Louisiana and in other coastal communities across America. The effects on home and business owners in the lowest-lying areas are painfully obvious. But imagine how this will impact the whole community economically and socially. Unfortunately, it appears, we won't have to imagine much longer.

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# School for scandal



CAL THOMAS  
 TRIBUNE MEDIA

My first question after reading about seven teachers in an Atlanta, Ga., public school accused of altering standardized test scores to make it appear students performed better than they actually did was: How could they?

The seven were nicknamed "the chosen" and, according to Georgia state investigator Richard Hyde, the less than magnificent seven sat in a locked room without windows, erasing wrong answers and inserting correct ones. It's one thing for a child to cheat on a test; it's quite another for teachers to do it.

Compounding the cheating scandal is that the children in this elementary school are mostly poor and African-American. How are they helped to develop a moral sense, not to mention an academic foundation that will lift them out of poverty, if they get the message that cheating is better than achieving?

According to The New York Times, the scandal goes beyond cheating. Retired district superintendent Beverly L. Hall is among 35 Atlanta educators indicted by a Fulton County grand jury. Dr. Hall was charged with "racketeering, theft, influencing witnesses, conspiracy and making false statements." Hall reportedly earned more than \$500,000 in performance bonuses. She faces up to 45 years in prison.

Dr. Hall has received considerable recognition for her achievements, which later turned out to be counterfeit. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan invited her to the White House. In 2009, The American Association of School Administrators named her superintendent of the year. It was a case of something being too good to check. Who doesn't want to see poor and minority children succeed in school? It appears

politicians they support keep theirs. As long as the monopoly survives, we can expect more cheating and corner-cutting and less real achievement for children who ought to be everyone's first concern.

Instead, as Atlanta would suggest, public school children are subject to all manner of manipulation and disservice by people charged with educating them. Perhaps if parents had the freedom to send their children to a school they believed would offer them a better shot at true success they would fare better. Could school choice be the answer?

Indiana thinks so. Last week, the state's Supreme Court upheld a voucher program that gives poor and middle-class families access to tax dollars to help them pay private school tuition. Parents should decide where their children go to school.

It's not the children who cannot achieve.

It's the system that fails them. "Our schools desperately need to be fixed," writes Robinson. "But creating a situation in which teachers are more likely than students to cheat cannot be the right path. ... Students are not widgets. I totally reject the idea that students from underprivileged neighborhoods cannot learn. Of course they can."

Authorities should pursue investigations of alleged cheating by teachers and school administrators. Meanwhile, for this and many other reasons, the school choice movement is gaining strength. It is seen by increasing numbers of Americans as the best way to prevent cheating children out of the decent education they deserve.

Readers may e-mail Cal Thomas at [tmseditor@tribune.com](mailto:tmseditor@tribune.com).

# LETTERS

## April brings focus on sexual assault

Anyone who follows the headlines knows that sexual trauma happens often and close to home. Given the intense media focus on the case in Steubenville, Ohio, where two teenage boys were recently found delinquent (guilty) of raping a teenage girl, it is imperative that we use this horrific incident as an opportunity to educate our community about sexual trauma and collectively work to prevent it in our community.

As executive director of STAR (Baton Rouge's Sexual Trauma Awareness and Response Center), I know that what happened in Steubenville happens in every community, including ours. We just don't hear about it because victims are often too ashamed and intimidated to speak out. I know that most victims of rape and other forms of sexual trauma never talk about it or report it to police.

I know that about one in five Louisiana women and one in 71 men are rape survivors. I know that the 500 people who seek support each year from STAR, which serves East Baton Rouge and the surrounding six parishes, are a small minority of the estimated 40,000 adult victims living in East Baton Rouge Parish alone.

Even so, awareness of sexual trauma and the devastating effects on individuals and communities has never been greater. Social media and non-stop news are calling unparalleled attention to the injustice of sexual trauma, as seen recently with high-profile incidents in Steubenville, India and Penn State. This media attention helps empower survivors of sexual trauma to come forward and find support on the path to recovery.

April is National Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and Baton Rouge is one of the communities standing up for sexual trauma prevention by proclaiming "It's time ... to talk about it." Just last week, Mayor Kip Holden proclaimed April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month in East Baton Rouge Parish. STAR has several events planned for April, such as a child-abuse prevention workshop, a women's self-defense seminar and an opportunity for businesses and organizations to get involved in spreading our message of prevention.

Sexual trauma is a community issue. That's why we need everyone involved to eliminate this as a social problem. Everyone should visit <http://www.brstar.org> to learn more about this month's events and about the work that STAR does on a daily basis to prevent and respond to our community's incidences of sexual trauma.

**Racheal Hebert**  
 Executive director, STAR  
 Baton Rouge

## Tax-swap plan deserves a vote

The more I read about the proposed plan to eliminate personal income taxes, the more I am convinced that it's a bad proposal. At first, it looked attractive. Now I'm not so sure. It appears that in order to give corporate entities tax breaks, a greater increase is placed on the backs of citizens/smokers.

Damage caused from smoking is well-established. If state government is serious about curtailing smoking and reducing health-care costs, why not raise the tax to \$20 per pack or outlaw the sale of tobacco products in the state of Louisiana? I believe the state just wants to raise revenue by increasing the tax just enough to keep people buying tobacco products while reaping additional revenue. On the other hand, if the proposed tax has the expected results of reducing smoking, what else will have to be taxed in the future to maintain (that) revenue?

Proposed changes to start taxing services, such as cable, phone services, landscape services, haircuts, pet care etc. as well as ending tax-free days for school supplies, disaster supply purchases etc. will place the burden mostly on citizens. Consider the tax increase on big items such as house construction, vehicles, tractors, boats etc.

I agree with the state treasurer. This proposal should be placed before the citizens for a vote. Contact your state representatives and express your view before this sham becomes a reality.

**Fred Spagna Sr.**  
 Baton Rouge