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EDITORIAL

Planning critical to the future

Coastal Louisiana is eroding and sinking. And the water level of the Gulf of Mexico is rising.

Those two continuing conditions make it necessary for coastal residents to think now about the future we face and to adapt to head off as many future dangers as we can.

South Louisiana has always been particularly vulnerable to hurricanes and tropical storms that hit the Gulf.

As our land has continued to sink, the water has continued to rise and our wetlands have washed away, even passing storms or sustained winds can threaten our homes and businesses with flooding.

We have taken some action against these forces, but not nearly enough.

"The levee system is not sufficient to protect our fragile coastal communities over the long term," said Marco Cocito-Monoc, the Greater New Orleans Foundation's director of regional initiatives. "The landscape along the coast is drastically changing, which threatens an entire way of life for the people who live and work there. Adaptation is essential."

To that end, the foundation has commissioned a study by Baton Rouge's Center for Planning Excellence looking at how coastal residents should adapt to the changes we've seen and those we expect in the decades to come.

Some of the adaptations we will need are already known to us.

We know, for instance, that we need an integrated approach to flood protection and coastal restoration.

If we can rebuild some of the natural protections the coast has long enjoyed and keep others from falling victim to erosion, we will significantly improve our chances of survival.

Levees to protect us from rising water also must be part of the equation.

So too must be efforts such as home elevations, things that make high water less destructive.

The main difficulty we have faced in the past has been apathy. Many people did not realize the dire state of our danger.

As more have come to realize the risks we face, we have been confronted with another challenge: There is simply no adequate supply of money to undertake the kinds of changes we need.

That could be changing as well. The state has made some great strides in recent years, among them approving a preliminary 50-year plan aimed at protecting the coast and its residents from the water that is rising.

There is still little money for the plan, but the hope is that BP's oil-spill fines can form part of the money it will take to get it started.

Beyond these large efforts, though, there will continue to be a need for smaller plans focused on individual communities.

Those are the focus of the study, and those will be crucial to our continued ability to live and work and thrive in south Louisiana.

We cannot tell for sure what the future will hold. But the more we plan for the challenges we will face, the brighter and more secure that future is likely to be.

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

OPINION



A plan to keep us dry



KEITH MAGILL
 EXECUTIVE EDITOR

One thing that becomes clear when reading Terrebonne Parish's proposed master plan is that we live in a swamp.

Nearly 90 percent of the parish's land is considered "environmentally sensitive," mostly wetlands, the plan says. It would cost so much to build homes or businesses there — if it's physically or legally possible at all — that it is considered off limits to almost any kind of development.

About 5.6 percent of the parish's land — 66,000 acres — is vacant or used for agriculture. The master plan makes some educated guesses based on population growth estimates, historic development trends and other factors, that Terrebonne will run out of land to develop in anywhere from 141 to 437 years.

Whether that's a lot or a little depends on your world view. You won't be around when we run out of room, but your great-grandchildren might. And if it takes 437 years to use up all of that land, you're talking about, as the master plan notes, 17 generations.

It also depends on whether nature cooperates and a hurricane doesn't wipe out the land that's left before anyone gets a chance to develop it.

As it stands, we're depending on a scaled-down levee system that everyone involved says cannot be guaranteed to protect us against a direct hit. And the \$12.9 billion the Army Corps says it will cost to construct a full-fledged Morganza hurricane-protection system will likely never materialize.

The plan acknowledges that major levee systems, as well as major river-sediment diversions that might restore the wetlands that once buffered inland communities from Gulf storms, are needed immediately.

But it notes that even if work began now, it could take 40-50 years to complete. The plan calls for a major shift in emphasis from levees and drainage systems — so called "structural" approaches — to smart planning, elevating and flood-proofing buildings and making the most flood-prone areas off limits to development, so-called "non-structural" efforts.

"For the first time, the parish wants to make sure that sustainability and resiliency are introduced into the comprehensive planning process so that an integrated approach to hazard loss reduction considers all possible aspects of the issue," the plan says.

The parish has already used FEMA money to help hundreds of residents who have flooded repeatedly either build higher or move to higher ground elsewhere.

But the council and administration have lacked the courage to outlaw development even in the most flood-prone areas. Some have legitimate concerns that doing so would stymie business and residential growth. Others are catering to the whims of developers who make money building things or to residents who complain they don't want government telling them what they can and can't do with their property.

In the end, that may not matter. If FEMA ever stops its foot-dragging

and approves Terrebonne's long-debated flood maps, the parish will be forced to require new homes and businesses in many areas to elevate. If it doesn't, FEMA will end the parish's participation in the National Flood Insurance Program, the only option residents have to insure their homes and businesses against flooding.

The master plan calls for lots of other "safer," "stronger" and "smarter" ways to prevent flood damage, some old and some new.

Overall, I like the apparent shift from one almost exclusively focused on building levees, drainage systems and coastal-restoration projects, some of which are so expensive and time-consuming they may never be completed. It's refreshing to see a plan that also encourages more-affordable, sensible measures and makes numerous references to "reducing risk," "sustainability" and "resiliency."

Even if Vision 2030 wins approval — it heads to the council for a vote Feb. 27 — it is not binding. It's supposed to offer guidance to manage growth and enhance our quality of life over the next two decades.

If they do it right, the council and administration will use the plan to take actions that give a few generations of residents a decent chance of living here without the continual cycle of flooding and rebuilding that too many have had to endure.

If they do it wrong, officials will let the plan collect dust for years until it's time to revise or will let it crumble under pressure from one interest or another.

Which do you think will happen?

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Drone double standard



CAL THOMAS
 TRIBUNE MEDIA

An unsigned and undated Justice Department white paper, obtained by NBC News, reports The New York Times, "... is the most detailed analysis yet to come into public view regarding the Obama legal team's views about the lawfulness of killing, without a trial, an American citizen who executive branch officials decide is an operational leader of Al Qaeda or one of its allies."

The proviso is they must pose "an imminent threat of violent attack against the United States."

If "an informed, high-level official" of the government decides they are a threat, the paper says, and if capture is not feasible, they may be killed.

Weren't some conservatives who made the same argument during the Bush administration criticized in certain newspaper editorials, and by liberal commentators and the Hollywood elite?

There hasn't been a huge outcry from those on the left who attacked President Bush for his doctrine of pre-emptive strikes against terrorists.

Recall, too, the vitriol directed at Vice President Dick Cheney for defending "enhanced interrogation" techniques on suspected terrorists in order to obtain information that might prevent new attacks against Americans.

The unclassified paper comes from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, which according to the Times, provided justification for killing the radical Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. Awlaki, born in New Mexico, was killed in an American drone strike in September 2011.

right to self-defense in wartime, but goes a step further.

As summarized by The New York Times: "(It) emphasizes that the decision to kill a citizen in certain circumstances is not one in which courts should play any role, asserting that judges should not restrain

the executive branch in making tactical judgments about when to use force against a senior al Qaeda leader."

Weren't some conservatives who made the same argument during the Bush administration criticized in certain newspaper editorials, and by liberal commentators and the Hollywood elite?

The white paper says that if a target poses an imminent threat to the U.S., and cannot be captured, the strike "would be conducted in a manner consistent with applicable law of war principles."

It goes on to read, "A lawful killing in self-defense is not an assassination. In the Department's view, a lethal operation conducted against a U.S. citizen whose conduct poses an imminent threat ... would be a le-

gitimate act of national self-defense that would not violate the assassination ban."

The American Civil Liberties Union has been consistent with both the Bush and Obama administrations. It strongly — and wrongly in my view — criticized President Bush for his anti-terrorism policies.

Reacting to the publication of the white paper, Hina Shamsi, director of the ACLU's National Security Project, called it "a profoundly disturbing document."

"It's hard to believe," she added, "that it was produced in a democracy built on a system of checks and balances."

She characterized it as "... a stunning overreach of executive authority."

She may have a point. One that should be debated in Congress. Appropriate committees should invite or, if necessary, subpoena the person, or persons, who wrote the document.

U.S. citizens should know what kind of action constitutes "imminent threat."

At present, the government's definition is a little cryptic.

Given the way some criminal lawyers have "gamed" the U.S. court system to free hardened criminals, the president might be justified in this approach.

But the larger question of how much authority he should be allowed to have in these circumstances and whether U.S. citizenship alone should be enough to guarantee due process when there is substantial evidence someone is involved in plots to kill other Americans is a subject worthy of congressional consideration.

Readers may e-mail Cal Thomas at tmseditor@tribune.com.

LETTERS

Safety first at rail crossings

The horrific crash in Texas last November involving a train and a flatbed trailer that was part of a parade honoring veterans is a reminder that, despite significant progress in safety, rail crossings must be approached with great caution. The Texas crash resulted in multiple deaths and injuries among riders on the trailer.

Fortunately, crashes and deaths at railroad crossings have declined both in Louisiana and nationwide. The Federal Railroad Administration reports that, nationally, incidents at public and private crossings fell from 9,461 in 1981 to 1,956 in 2011. The national Operation Lifesaver program reports that injuries and deaths at crossings declined by 84 percent since the organization was founded in 1972. The Highway Safety Research Group at LSU reports that in Louisiana in 2011, there were 45 injuries and seven deaths reported involving trains.

Despite the progress, Operation Lifesaver reports that a person or vehicle is hit by a train about every three hours. A variety of causes, such as distracted driving and trying to outrun a moving train, contribute to crashes at rail crossings. It is important for drivers to realize that they and their passengers will almost always be the losers in a crash with a moving train.

A train pulling 100 cars, traveling 50 miles an hour, takes about one mile to stop. The average train weighs 12 million pounds — about 4,000 times more than a car. A motorist in a crash between a train and a motor vehicle is many times more likely to die than in a collision between two motor vehicles.

The Louisiana Highway Safety Commission partners with Louisiana Operation Lifesaver and other organizations to reduce the number of crashes at rail crossings.

We urge motorists to obey the flashing lights and lowered crossing gates at rail crossings — don't try to drive around them. It's not only illegal to do so, but it can cost you your life.

We also remind drivers that you can't always hear a train approaching if your vehicle windows are up, air conditioning is on and music is blaring in your vehicle. It's also common for drivers to miscalculate how quickly a train will reach a crossing.

We are making progress in rail-crossing safety, but we continue to have too many deaths and injuries at these sites. Use common sense. Obey warning signals as you approach a rail crossing.

If there is no warning signal, follow the old rule of stopping, looking and listening. Doing so can save your life and that of your passengers.

Lt. Col. John LeBlanc
 Executive director,
 Louisiana Highway Safety
 Commission

Fair tax would help Americans

America works when Americans work.

We have driven out of America millions of jobs over the last 30 years because we can't compete with countries with lower costs of doing business.

Our wages, benefits, regulations, taxes, etc. all contribute to driving the cost of doing business up.

Consequently, jobs go elsewhere.

There is a bill in Congress that resurrects America as arguably the most cost-competitive place to do business in the world, the Fair Tax bill.

No more federal tax on income.

Your gross pay is your take home pay.

Taxes to fund the government are generated by taxing consumption of new goods and services.

To help citizens pay this tax on basic goods and services, a prebate is paid monthly to all legal Americans.

No favors for special interests, everyone is treated the same.

Manufacturers worldwide would flock to the USA to build factories. Good paying jobs return.

Call your congressman today and ask him to support the bill.

America works when Americans work.

Anthony Gasbarro
 Fairhope, Ala.