

# New Orleans Area Political Leaders Fighting for Better Hurricane Protection



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on October 16, 2012 at 2:55 PM, updated October 16, 2012 at 5:44 PM

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**Hurricane protection** gained renewed focus Tuesday when five southeast Louisiana parish presidents and four mayors gathered to light a fire under the **Army Corps and Engineers** and Congress for more money and faster work. They signed a "storm defense compact" that:

- Asks for a surge barrier at the Rigolets and Chef Menteur passes separating the **Gulf of Mexico** from **Lake Pontchartrain**
- Seeks better storm modeling and hurricane classification
- Demands acceleration of the corps construction process
- Requests changes in evacuation plans and routes.

At a news conference at **Jefferson Parish** President **John Young**'s office in **Elmwood**, each spoke of the needs of individual parishes and cities. But the emphasis was on a unified front as they implored Washington for help. (Read the **Storm Defense Compact letter**.)

"Traditionally we have not worked that way," said President Natalie Robottom of **St. John the Baptist Parish**. "But we are here as a compact."

Lest they be seen as parochial whiners unworthy of more federal attention, Young said local hurricane protection -- including restoration of Louisiana's coastal wetlands -- will help preserve the fisheries and oil and gas industry that supply much of the country.

"It's a national issue," Young said. Without federal aid, "you'll have the Gulf of Mexico lapping at the door of metropolitan New Orleans."

The call for action came seven weeks after **Hurricane Isaac** paralyzed the **New Orleans** area for more than 24 hours and flooded **Barataria, Braithwaite, Crown Point, Jean Lafitte** and north **LaPlace**. While Isaac blew maximum sustained winds of only 80 mph and was ranked a Category 1 storm on the National Hurricane Center's Saffir-Simpson wind scale, its surge at the Lake Borgne Surge Barrier reached 13-1/2 feet, with higher waves. That would have been high enough to top the Industrial Canal floodwalls in New Orleans, if the new surge barrier had not been built.

Whether anything comes of the new effort to improve hurricane protection is a question of national priorities. After the failure of levees and floodwalls during **Hurricane Katrina** sank the New Orleans area in 2005, killing 1,833 people, Congress gave the Corps of Engineers \$14.6 billion to bolster protection here. Since then, the corps has raised levees, built surge barriers and hardened floodwalls at a phenomenal pace.

That's what's needed again, Young said, imploring the corps to "go into emergency mode."

"It's unacceptable for us to continue to be reactive," said Garret Graves, chairman of the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. "We've got to stop this responsive nature and get in front of the vulnerabilities."

The officials deplored the routinely glacial progress of corps planning, studies, funding and construction. **St. Charles Parish** President V.J. St. Pierre Jr. said it took 18 years to obtain federal permits for the west St. Charles levee. Robottom topped that: "St. John has had a project in the works for 40 years."

"You are looking at a bunch of elected officials who are frustrated," St. Pierre said.



Hurricane protection at LaPlace was insufficient to keep

Interstate 10 from flooding during Hurricane Isaac. *The Associated Press archive*

The specific improvements sought by the group range from ensuring that flood gauges in the 17th Street Canal are functioning -- six of eight failed during Isaac, Young said -- to elevating Interstate 10 through LaPlace and building ring levees around the Lafitte area.

None would be as costly or colossal as a surge barrier across the Rigolets and Chef passes, an idea that the corps once promoted but dropped in 1977 as too costly, after environmental groups challenged the scope of the agency's environmental studies and a federal judge ordered it to consider other alternatives.

Young and **St. Tammany Parish** President Pat Brister, along with staffers of U.S. Sen. **Mary Landrieu**, D-La., were credited with organizing Tuesday's assembly, an extension of the **Ponchartrain Rim Caucus** that Young christened in 2011. Also attending the news conference were **St. Bernard Parish** President David Peralta, mayors Vinny Mosca of **Harahan**, Donald Villere of **Mandeville**, **Mike Yenni** of **Kenner** and Bob Zabbia of Ponchatoula and **Westwego** City Councilman Ted Munch.

"We each have our individual problems," Brister said. "But we are working together."