

U.S. Senate
Homeland Security Subcommittee
Hurricane Isaac
September 25, 2012

Honorable Chairman and Senators – I am Natalie Robottom, St. John the Baptist Parish President. Thank you for allowing me to address the Committee on behalf of our residents.

Over the last 25 days, we have been working hard to recover from the widespread devastation and flooding caused by Hurricane Isaac. More than 7,000 homes and 12,000 households have been affected by the hurricane, many of which were not in a flood zone. Through the grace of God, no lives were lost this time, but the loss of personal property and a lifetime of possessions and treasured memories have caused frustration and despair within our close knit community. St. John parish has never flooded – water accumulates in our streets and along interstate interchanges – but not in our homes.

Hurricane Preparedness is an ongoing effort within St. John Parish. Department Heads and staff members were trained for months, attended one-on-one meetings, revised standard operating procedures, and participated in a Hurricane Table Top to ensure preparedness for emergencies and other disasters. Public meetings were hosted throughout the parish to assist residents in developing hurricane plans for their families. Hurricane preparedness guides were distributed through utility bills, local libraries, government offices and local businesses. Preparedness information was provided through news releases, advertisements, public meetings and local events leading up to hurricane season. Residents were also encouraged to register for First Call Alerts that allow them to receive free weather and emergency information and parish updates through text messaging and emails.

The Parish was proactive in its preparations and communications to its residents for hurricane preparedness and disaster planning, but no one anticipated the disaster that unfolded in our community.

The National Weather Service issued a hurricane watch for Louisiana on Sunday, August 26th, with then Tropical Storm Isaac about 52 hours out from the coast of Louisiana. I, along with the Governor of Louisiana and the President of the United States, issued Emergency Disaster Declarations and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was partially activated. Situational awareness was communicated to residents, Parish officials, and staff from that point forward. The Parish continued storm preparations by securing Government facilities, pre-positioning generators at water systems, multiple drainage pumps and lift stations. They also pre-positioned barricades in anticipation of road closures in low-lying areas and removed potential drainage barriers to ensure the parish drainage systems functioned properly. The Sheriff dispatched officers to the homes of residents north of I-10 encouraging their evacuation, but securing contact information for those electing to remain in their homes.

On the morning of Monday, August 27th, the Parish EOC was fully activated, the school system closed, and sand bags distributed throughout the parish. Approximately 30,000 sand bags were distributed until weather conditions worsened to a point dictating the stoppage. Daily conference calls were held

with the National Weather Service, GOHSEP, state agencies and surrounding parishes to obtain and provide situational awareness on Hurricane Isaac. Based on those discussions, SLOSH modeling, and historical data, a voluntary evacuation was issued for residents in low-lying areas. Parish officials continued to monitor weather updates, including wind speed, surge predictions, and other weather related warnings. Weather and preparedness updates were disseminated through press releases, social media and media outlets as weather conditions changed.

On the morning of Tuesday, August 28th, Tropical Storm Isaac was upgraded to a Category 1 Hurricane and water levels began rising slowly at the Peavine Boat Launch located on the northeast boundary of the Parish. At approximately 2:00 a.m., Hurricane Isaac made landfall along the coast of Southeast Louisiana as a Category 1 storm with winds up to 75 mph. At approximately 3:00 a.m., St. John Parish began experiencing Hurricane Force winds. By then, all emergency responders and parish employees were hunkered down awaiting passage of the hurricane.

On Wednesday, August 29th at around 6:30 a.m., the Utilities Department was forced to shut off water service to LaPlace to avoid contamination of the system due to flooding and wind damage to a system located 10 miles north of LaPlace adjacent to Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas. Search and rescue efforts began at around 9:00 a.m. and remained in effect for more than 48 hours from the east side of the parish to the west side - from LaPlace to Garyville - from the Interstate to the River Road. In addition to the St. John Sheriff's Office and Fire Department, the Louisiana National Guard, the LA Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Coast Guard, and other volunteers assisted in the search and rescue efforts.

This was not a drainage issue, but our greatest fears were realized when Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas emptied themselves into St. John Parish. The evacuation routes were shut down - I-10 and Airline Hwy. were under water and portions of River Road were also blocked.

The Parish opened their temporary shelter to allow residents a safe haven until some 90 commercial buses could transport them to state-run shelters in north Louisiana. It is estimated that by Wednesday evening, over 3,000 residents were evacuated to state shelters, as search and rescue efforts continued throughout the Parish.

Although the western edge of the Parish had not yet experienced flooding from Hurricane Isaac, by the afternoon of Thursday, August 30th, water levels began rising in Lake Maurepas causing the homes of residents from western LaPlace toward Reserve and Garyville to flood. Parish search and rescue efforts resumed and residents in the affected areas were transported to shelters in North Louisiana.

As evacuations continued, high winds and storm surge in Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas caused all exits at I-10 and I-55 to become impassable due to an excess of 6 feet of water. Exit 206 at Belle Terre Blvd. was not re-opened until September 1st and Exit 209 at US Hwy 51 did not re-open until September 2nd. US Hwy 641 leading to I-10 at Airline Hwy. and Airline Hwy. at the St. John/St. Charles Parish line was also closed due to flooding.

Once flood waters began to recede, restoration of power began in areas safe to enter. According to Entergy representatives, 95% of Parish households were without power initially. Scattered power

outages remained for approximately 14 days. All residents in the city of LaPlace, the largest city in St. John Parish, were without drinking water for 4 days because utilities crews could not reach water wells in Ruddock to make needed repairs due to high water levels along US Hwy. 51.

As of today, power has been restored to all but 5 customers, water has been restored parish-wide, a levee of Hesco baskets has been created around our LaPlace water system, and lift stations throughout the parish are being repaired.

Three days following the storm, a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) was open and operating, registering over 12,000 residents through Thursday, September 20th. Through that date, 10,000 home inspections were completed, with more than \$18.3 million in Housing Assistance and over \$2.8 million in Other Needs Assistance awarded. Over 5,700 residents have been determined eligible for Temporary Shelter Assistance, while over 600 are in area hotels. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was up and running on September 4th, approving over 8,342 Parish households for approximately \$3.4M in assistance through the Disaster Supplemental Assistance Program (DSNAP) over 10 days.

Residents displaced by Hurricane Isaac and transported to state shelters began returning home on Tuesday, September 4th and the American Red Cross managed local shelter operations at the Parish Civic Center for 90 individuals. Housing continues to be a major problem as the parish lacks the capacity to house its residents due to limited hotel rooms and rental property. However, housing solutions are a key component for our community's recovery.

An Executive Order has been issued allowing temporary housing, permit fees waived, and Temporary Housing Units approved by FEMA. My staff is working with the HUD, the Hotel Association, DOTD, the LA Housing Task Force, OCD, FEMA and GOHSEP to address short- and long-term housing needs, as well as transportation to aid our recovery. The Parish has implemented a Business Call Center and Resource Center and is working with the SBA to help businesses through the process. We have also partnered with the Home Builders Association of New Orleans to educate residents against fraud and to provide information and respond to questions about rebuilding.

The Parish is coordinating volunteer efforts and has established a Volunteer Assistance Hotline to pair volunteers with those in need. A Volunteer Reception Center was opened Saturday to assist residents who are uninsured, underinsured, elderly, disabled or single parents.

The Debris Removal Program is underway, although not progressing as quickly as desired, but we are working with our federal and state partners to expedite the process and reduce the safety and health issues posed by the long-term presence of this debris.

Despite the flooding of two public schools, all parish schools have re-opened with hopes of maintaining a sense of normalcy and encouraging residents to remain in our Parish. Both schools are operating in temporary sites and repairs are planned for permanent facilities.

The Parish requested and received support during response and recovery efforts from multiple State and Federal Agencies, other Parish Governments, local business, individuals, private non-profits and

multiple faith based and volunteer organizations. The outpouring of support received by our Parish is greatly appreciated and will never be forgotten.

At this point, our main concern is securing a hurricane protection system like our neighbors to the east and preventing road closures that isolated our residents following Hurricane Isaac. Because of widespread flooding, all Parish outlets were closed at one point. This is unacceptable for the residents of St. John the Baptist, the state of Louisiana and the United States of America!!! Not only did this make it impossible for some residents to evacuate as water inundated our parish, but flood water remained several days after the storm interfering with our recovery efforts.

One out of every five Louisiana residents live in Southeast Louisiana, which is inclusive of St. John the Baptist, St. James, and St. Charles Parishes. Two of the largest coastal parishes, Orleans and Jefferson, have over three quarters of a million people between them. With US Highway 61, US Interstate 10, and US Interstate 55 were closed due to flooding from Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas, the most important north and west bound evacuation routes effectively eliminated.

Entergy's nuclear power plant (Waterford 3), provides critical power to petroleum plants and refineries in the River Parishes and is located in St. Charles Parish. It is the largest Entergy facility serving approximately 2.8 million utility customers in four (4) states, providing 12% of the electrical needs in Louisiana. When flood waters close the major evacuation routes for some 85,500 residents of St. Charles and St. John parish living within 10 miles of the plant, Waterford 3 is unable to restart until evacuation routes are cleared and passable. Delays in restarting the plant presents a significant potential problem for our nation's supply of petroleum and chemicals, in addition to problems faced by our residents.

More than 7,000 households were affected by Hurricane Isaac throughout St. John Parish. Some households will only have temporary housing needs, while others with severe damage will have long-term housing needs. Without housing solutions within the parish, many residents may not return home. This compounds the impact to our community, as parish residents are an integral part of our government workforce, parish school system, and parish medical care system, just to name a few.

St. John the Baptist Parish and our neighbors to the west and south were under water. But the implications of Hurricane Isaac go far beyond the households and businesses of St. John the Baptist Parish. Although our parish was devastated, the regional and national impact to shutting down the interstate system and curtailing production of our refineries was felt around the country through increased gas prices.

Hurricane Isaac served to exacerbate the need for levee protection for St. John Parish residents. For over forty years, levee protection for our residents has been discussed, but never completed. In 1971, a resolution authorizing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to include St. John the Baptist Parish in the West Shore-Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana Hurricane Protection Project was offered in the House of Representatives. Despite being impacted by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike and Tropical Storm Lee, this project has not received federal funding since Fiscal Year 2010, and it is not currently in the FY13 budget. Completion of this project is contingent upon Corps approval and Federal

and non-Federal funding. The state, the Pontchartrain Levee District and St. John Parish are prepared to move this project forward, but we need help expediting the approval and permitting process, as well as securing federal funding. As other projects have been fast-tracked – we know it is possible.

Approximately 120,000 people live in St. John, St. James and St. Charles parishes supporting billions of dollars of investments currently in the river region, with over \$30 billion more in potential investments in this industrial corridor. We are awaiting results of a feasibility study on the West Shore Lake Pontchartrain project evaluating three alignments to reduce the risk of storm damage for these three parishes. How many studies are needed before our residents are deemed worthy of protection?

Preliminary economic analysis from this study indicates a viable hurricane and storm damage risk reduction project in the West Shore Lake Pontchartrain study area. The 3 alignments under consideration provide a 1 percent level of risk reduction for the east bank of St. John the Baptist, St. James and the western portion (Montz) of St Charles Parishes. Estimated costs for the three (3) alignments or alignments in phases are from \$300 million to \$600 million and include levees, floodwalls, navigation structures, pump stations, LERRDS, and mitigation. One alignment includes risk reduction for Ascension Parish. All of the areas on the western shore of Lake Pontchartrain incurred flooding as a result of Hurricane Isaac.

It is time to take action and move the West Shore–Lake Pontchartrain Hurricane Protection Project forward. I humbly ask the members of this committee to take time to review detailed reports, alignment plans and alternatives completed over the past decades of study. Hurricane Isaac was the ultimate study and it failed. We are not a helpless people, but we need your help to secure the only system that can protect our residents from this type of devastation – Inclusion in the Federal Levee System.

Thank You.

Natalie Robottom
Parish President
St. John the Baptist Parish