

## Hurricane Protection, Louisiana

Grass roots efforts by the State's levee boards and other interested parties to improve hurricane protection in Southeast Louisiana have led to the February 21, 2001 initiation by the Corps of Engineers of a reconnaissance study which will consider increasing the level of protection for certain existing projects to Category 4 or 5. This includes the Lake Ponchartrain and Vicinity, West Bank Hurricane Protection, New Orleans to Venice, and Larose to Golden Meadow projects. This is the first step in a three stage process that could lead to the expenditure of as much as \$2 billion on hurricane protection measures, which would also affect in very substantial ways all activities in the area (i.e. drainage, navigation, economic development, coastal restoration, resource exploitation, etc.). The scope of the reconnaissance (recon) study is as follows:

1. Prepare a report describing a proposed plan that would justify proceeding with a detailed feasibility study.
2. Prepare a Project Study Plan (PSP) which would outline what would be studied, how long it would take, and how much it would cost.
3. Coordinate with all of the stakeholders in the affected area (i.e. levee boards, parish and city officials, state agencies and other federal agencies, etc.). Coordination would include attending meetings of the various organizations to explain the study and to seek support for its implementation.
4. Obtain a letter of commitment from a local sponsor.
5. Prepare a Feasibility Study Cost Share Agreement. The local sponsor shares the cost of the Feasibility Study on a SO/SO basis with the Corps, but can provide work in kind in lieu of direct cash payment. This agreement outlines how this will be done before the local sponsor issues the letter of commitment noted above.

Recon studies are normally limited to a cost of \$100,000 and duration of 12 months. A pending request to higher authority within the Corps seeks permission for a spending limit of \$500,000 and 18 months duration. Once authorized, by federal law, the work on the study must cease once either limit is met.

If the recon study is successful, the second phase of the process, the Feasibility Study, would follow. This phase is estimated to cost between \$4 and \$8 million, and to take 3 to 5 years to complete. The work done in this stage includes:

1. A detailed analysis of alternative plans, including environmental issues, cost estimates, economic benefits, etc.
2. Preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the selected plan.
3. Preparation of a feasibility report for the selected plan.
4. Coordination with stakeholders.
5. Development of a financial plan for the local sponsor's 35% share of the project cost.
6. Development of a draft Project Coordination Plan (PCA) between the Corps and the local sponsor.
7. Work related to obtaining Congressional authorization for the project.

If Congress authorizes the project, it remains for the Corps and the local sponsor to implement it. The cost of and the pace at which this third stage occurs will depend on many factors, not least of which is the availability of local sponsor funds.

At this point the details of the project are undetermined. Increasing the size and strength of the existing hurricane protection systems is one possibility. Another idea calls for rebuilding the barrier island system along the coast to restore the protection they formerly afforded. One system might work for the area east of the

Mississippi, while another quite different one might be more appropriate to the west. A plan for isolating Lake Ponchartrain from the Gulf of Mexico during a storm is a concept likely to be re-examined.

Clearly, this recon study is the start of something of great importance to the State, and the State needs to be proactively involved in it. Although there is no requirement for a given level of participation by the State in the study, nor any provision for crediting any cost incurred, the need to get things headed in a realistic and appropriate direction right from the start cannot be overstated. The potential impacts of the project are so large. The need for it to accommodate the State's comprehensive vision for the coastal region, and the values of the manifold constituencies resident there, is vital. The complexity and difficulty of this project; technically, politically, environmentally, and financially, suggests that the limited federal funds need to be spent very efficiently. Active involvement by the State; providing input to the plan development; representing the wisdom, experience, and desires of the 10 levee districts, parishes and municipalities; making clear the limits of its financial capabilities; negotiating the PSP and local participation in Feasibility Study; and working through the issues relating to the Feasibility Cost Share Agreement; can help tremendously in insuring this. There is little room for delay, missteps, misunderstanding, reconsideration, etc.

Because this project is so important to us, we are emboldened to offer the following suggestions. We would like the Governor, as soon as possible, to designate the Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) as the tentative local sponsor. We feel that the Federal Projects Section of DOTD, with some special assistance, can meet the challenge. They are experienced in dealing with the Corps of Engineers on cost shared projects, they know the limits of State authority, they have good relations with the levee boards, they are familiar with the existing hurricane protection systems, and are used to dealing with other State and Federal agencies whose "turf" will be affected. They want to do a good job. Where they are deficient is in manpower.

If this project is to "fly" it will need the active, intense participation of all parties. There needs to be people at the Corps of Engineers offices on an almost daily basis, looking over their shoulders, taking part in discussions, communicating ideas to the levee boards, agencies, etc., getting feedback and helping to shape the direction of the plan. Getting the input of the boards and agencies, making them feel that they have a part in the plan development, and getting their input as to how to finance and administer its implementation is extremely important. The political ground needs to be cultivated, from top to bottom, from levee board to Congress. Relationships need to be established and a cooperative spirit promoted. We do not feel that DOTD is presently staffed to do these things with the intensity required.

We are comfortable with suggesting that DOTD supplement its Federal Projects staff with consultants who have worked for them for the last 14 years successfully handling two phases of the Mississippi River Deepening Project, and a related unique and creatively crafted mitigation plan, Mervin Morehiser and Dick Guidry. They have worked, as Morehiser & Associates, Inc., with the DOTD Federal Projects staff and the Corps Project Manager who would be administering the recon study. They have been doing almost exactly the kind of thing that needs to be done here. We have attached their resumes and copies of letters from both the Corps and DOTD related to their service. We feel that this team, comprised of an engineer and a businessman/politician, possesses the appropriate experience and expertise.

Previous experience with the Corps on cost shared projects has provided ample evidence that failure to be adequately involved from the very beginning of the process has its own costs; lost time and effort, cost over runs, public opposition and disappointment, and ill. Waiting until the Feasibility Study stage to "fix" things has often produced unsatisfactory results. We hope that you concur with our suggestions and find a way to proactively respond to this opportunity.