

**Comite River Diversion Canal Project Task Force**

**Minutes of Meeting  
2018 - 2019 Interim  
July 17, 2018**

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Representative Valarie Hodges, chairwoman of the Comite River Diversion Canal Project Task Force, called the meeting to order at 10:10 a.m. in Room 6, in the state capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

**II. ROLL CALL**

**LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Representative Valarie Hodges, chairwoman  
Representative Rogers J. Pope  
Senator Regina Barrow  
Senator Bodi White, vice chairman

**LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Representative Barbara Carpenter  
Senator Dale Erdey

**NON-LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Mark Harrell  
Christopher Knotts  
Jerry Passman  
Brandon Rogilio  
Paul Sawyer  
Tom Stephens  
Brenda Zeringue

**NON-LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Jason Lanclos  
J. R. Saucier  
Jerry Thibeau

**STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:**

House:

Ashleigh Clare-Kearney, attorney  
Glenn Fleming, attorney  
Angelique R. Mozee, committee secretary  
Danny Leming, sergeant at arms

Senate:

Fate Mitchell, sergeant at arms

### **III. OPENING REMARKS**

Representative Hodges gave an overview of House Concurrent Resolution No. 51 in 2014, that created the Comite River Diversion Canal Project. She discussed the impediments to complete the canal, the bipartisan efforts to move the project forward, and commended the task force, the Department of Transportation and Development, Congressman Garret Grave's Office, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for their commitment to the project.

### **IV. REQUEST FOR INFORMATION**

#### **Congressional Updates**

Mr. Paul Sawyer gave an update from Congressman Garret Grave's office. He stated that they will be conducting meetings with the congressional delegation, the non-federal sponsors and the members of the task force to layout a timeline on when the Comite River Canal Diversion Project will be completed. He stated that Congressman Graves will be meeting with the chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to urge that they finalize the guidelines as soon as possible.

Mr. Paul Sawyer stated that the monies for the Comite River and the East Baton Rouge Parish Flood Control projects will be funded from a disaster supplemental appropriation bill that stipulates certain projects to be funded 100%, with the existing dollars from the state and the Amite River Basin Commission. He gave an overview on how Congress in 1986 directed USACE to develop flood control and flood mitigation projects throughout the Amite River Basin.

Mr. Sawyer also gave an overview of the funds allocated to Restore LA, and the USACE monies for the Comite River project, the East Baton Rouge Parish Flood Control, and the West Shore Protection Levees in the river parishes.

Mr. Sawyer stated that Governor John Bel Edwards and Congressman Graves announced in April that Louisiana will receive never before used Community Development Block Grant money in the amount of \$1.2 billion, that is entirely designed for Block Mitigation. He said that Governor Edwards also issued an executive order indicating some of the strategies for Floodplain and Watershed Management in the state.

Mr. Sawyer stated that the \$1.2 billion is substantial in helping to modernize, how South Louisiana and the Capital Region addresses flood control, and to update the 1983 flood protection plan, to the post modern flood protection plan.

Mr. Sawyer addressed questions from Representative Hodges, Senator White, and Senator Barrow in reference to the flood plain management plan and drainage problems, modernizing the flood insurance program, the designs from USACE, monthly meetings, and the construction timeline to complete the project.

**Office of the Governor**

Mr. Pat Santos, Governor's Office, State Capitol, 4th floor, Baton Rouge, LA 70804, (225) 938-7218, spoke for information only. He stated that the Governor met with Lieutenant General Semonite in Louisiana and Washington, D.C. to explain the importance of the Comite River Diversion Canal Project. He gave a breakdown on how the funds will be used between numerous projects. \$1.4 billion from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) will be used for the Comite River Project, the East Baton Rouge Parish Flood Control project, and improving drainage in different Bayous. \$760 million will be used for the West Shore Hurricane Protection Project, \$15 million for Grand Isles Protection, and the remaining \$15 million will be split among different projects. In addition, the \$1.213 million received in April will allow USACE to look at the watersheds.

Mr. Santos stated that the Governor signed an executive order to take the monies with agencies including, the Department of Transportation and Development, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, and the Office of Community Development, to come together and prioritize and look at the science, which includes the educational institution and the water institute of the gulf, to do the work in a smart, efficient, and timely manner to move the project forward.

Mr. Santos gave an overview and addressed questions from Representative Hodges and Senator Barrow in reference to the Council of Watershed Management.

**U.S. Army Corps of Engineers**

Durund Elzey, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), 7400 Leake Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70118, (504) 862-2204, spoke for information only. Mr. Elzey gave an update on the USACE progress of the Comite River Diversion Canal Project.

He discussed the Memorandum of Agreement for relocation that was executed in December to move forward on the project. He commended the task force, the Governor's Office, the Congressional Delegation, the Department of Transportation and Development, and the Amite River Basin Commission for their effort in retrieving full funding.

Mr. Elzey gave highlights of the time frame and cost for Highway 61, relocation of utilities, real estate, and mitigation in order to proceed with construction. Mr. Elzey also advised the task force of the \$343 million via the Bi-Partisan Budget Act of 2018 that USACE received for the project. He stated that the balance to complete the project is \$373 million which will be funded in their FY 2018 budget, along with the contribution from the state.

Mr. Elzey addressed questions from Representatives Hodges and Pope, and Senator Barrow regarding mitigation, local companies and contractors participation in the bidding process, and including Scotlandville in the East Baton Rouge Flood Control Project.

**Department of Transportation and Development**

Mr. Shawn Wilson, secretary, Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD), no witness card provided, spoke for information only. He thanked the task force for the compliments that were shared and the team efforts of staff and the department in moving the project forward. Mr. Wilson commended Mr. Chris Knotts as an applicant for chief engineer for DOTD.

Mr. Wilson gave an overview of the effects of the Flood of 2016 and how DOTD doubled the Statewide Flood Control Program for the first time, from \$8 million to \$20 million.

Mr. Chris Knott gave an update on relocation of utilities, pipeline companies working together, and the purchase of "willing sellers" properties.

Mr. Wilson addressed questions from Senator Barrow in reference to the bidding and advertising process to secure contracts.

**Amite River Board of Commissioners**

Mr. Dietmar Rietschier, Amite River Basin Commission (ARBC), 3535 South Sherwood Forest Boulevard, Suite 135, Baton Rouge, LA 70815, (225) 296-4900, spoke for information only. Mr. Rietschier gave a brief comparison of the 1983 and the 2016 floods highest intensity of rain. He stated that the 1983 flood in Baker and Zachary was 13 inches, and the 2016 flood in Watson was 31 inches.

Mr. Rietschier discussed mitigation and land acquisition. He stated that the non-federal groups have been doing land acquisitions and have acquired 2,500 acres of land that does not include the mitigation bank ARBC bought years ago, of which 450 acres is for mitigation.

Mr. Larry S. Bankston, ARBC, 8708 Jefferson Highway, Baton Rouge, LA 70809, (225) 766-3800, spoke for information only. He stated that ARBC acquired available properties on both sides of the Comite River Diversion Canal, and submitted a list of those properties to the Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to evaluate and determine the number of mitigation credits ARBC will receive. He stated that the USACE indicated to ARBC that in the next two weeks they will have final taking lines for those who are not willing sellers to proceed with the eminent domain expropriations.

Mr. Bankston also advised the task force of a meeting with the pipeline companies attempting to coordinate with USACE and DOTD to drill 60 feet underneath the canal to lay out all the pipelines and to resolve issues to readjust the railroads.

Witness cards submitted by individuals who did not speak are as follows: 1 for information only. Witness cards are included in the committee records.

**Livingston Parish - Village of French Settlement**

Mr. Lawrence Callender, Village of French Settlement, P.O. Box 3, French Settlement, LA 70733, (225) 698-6100, spoke for information only. He read a brief statement into the record regarding the Comite River Diversion Canal Project, mitigation, purchasing of land, funding, and flood plain management plan.

**V. PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Mr. Wayne Messina, City of Central, 7256 Woodlett Drive, Central, LA 70818, (225) 505-7137, spoke for information only. He made comments in reference to restore and administrative cost for the Comite River project, the Rivers Act, dredging of the Comite and Amite Rivers, work on the Amite River weir, and the seal in the Lily Bayou structure.

**VI. CLOSING REMARKS**

Representative Hodges announced that the task force will meet before the end of the year to receive updates.

**VII. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 11:56 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

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Chairman Valarie Hodges  
Comite River Diversion Canal Project Task Force

Date approved: \_\_\_\_\_