

Comite River Diversion Canal Project Task Force

Minutes of Meeting
2022-2023 Interim
March 21, 2023

I. CALL TO ORDER

Representative Valarie Hodges, chairwoman of the Comite River Diversion Canal Project Task Force, called the meeting to order at 12:57 p.m. in Room 4, in the state capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

II. ROLL CALL

LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Representative Valarie Hodges, chairwoman
Representative Robby Carter
Representative Buddy Mincey
Senator Regina Barrow
Senator Rogers J. Pope

LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS ABSENT:

Senator Bodi White, vice chairman

NON-LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Doug Carlson
Mark Harrel
Chris Knotts
David Peterson
Paul Sawyer
Tom Stephens

NON-LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS ABSENT:

Phillip Fetterman
Jerry Passman
Brandon Rogillio
Larry Thomas
Eddie Williams
Brenda Zeringue

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Allison Williams, House legislative analyst
Darcas Deverteuil, House committee administrative assistant

ADDITIONAL ATTENDEES PRESENT:

Faye Talbot, House sergeant at arms
Anthony Lumbard, Senate sergeant at arms

III. OPENING REMARKS

Representative Hodges gave a brief overview on the history of the Comite River Diversion Canal Project and thanked the attendees for their continued diligence to the project. She discussed details of a recent site visit and stated that there was great coordination between the Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). She thanked Paul Sawyer from Congressman Graves' office for his knowledge and commitment to getting funding for the projects. She introduced Sam Crampton from Dewberry to provide the committee with information about Darlington Reservoir and the benefits of having a wet reservoir.

IV. DISCUSSION

Darlington Reservoir

Mr. Sam Crampton, Dewberry, 2835 Brandywine Rd., Ste. 100, Atlanta, GA 30341, (404)308-1286, spoke for information only and presented a presentation, titled "Darlington Reservoir Investigation", Exhibit A, which is included in the committee records. Mr. Crampton explained in detail how the addition of the Darlington Reservoir could potentially help with flood prevention.

Mr. Crampton answered questions from the Task Force regarding the comparisons of having a wet versus a dry reservoir and how both could have been utilized using the numbers from the flood of 2016 and 2021 as examples.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Department of Transportation and Development Presentation

Colonel Cullen Jones, USACE New Orleans, 7400 Leake Ave., New Orleans, LA 70118, (504) 862-2077, spoke for information only and presented a presentation, titled "Amite River and Tributaries-Comite River Diversion Project", Exhibit B, which is included in the committee records.

Representative Hodges asks the USACE to consider the possibility of conducting a study of doing a wet reservoir due to the push back surrounding dry reservoirs.

Colonel Jones answered questions from Representatives Mincey and Carter, and Senator Barrow relative to time frames to conduct a new study on wet reservoirs and the time frame for where they currently are on the study for the dry reservoir. He responded that a new study for the wet reservoir would approximately be a three year process, and that on the current dry reservoir they are projected to finish the study by November 2024.

Representative Carter suggested that when the USACE has meetings regarding the reservoirs, that they consider spreading the word in a variety of ways and not just by social media, for better attendance from the communities.

Ms. Christina Brignac, DOTD, 1201 Capitol Access Rd., Baton Rouge, LA 70801, (225) 379-1394, spoke for information only and presented a part of the presentation with the USACE to update the committee on the project and construction contracts progress.

Ms. Brignac answered questions from Representative Hodges regarding milestones and labor shortages with contractors.

Mr. Michael Futch, Florida Gas, 1300 Main St., Houston, TX 77002, (715) 989-2765, spoke for information only.

Mr. Nick Sims, USACE New Orleans, 7400 Leake Ave., New Orleans, LA 70118, (225) 219-5708, spoke for information only.

Mr. Futch and Mr. Sims answered questions from Mr. Sawyer regarding the completion timeline and the measure of protection the incomplete structure can currently provide. They responded that they are looking at third quarter of 2025 for completion of the Comite River Diversion Canal, and that although the structure is not complete, the segments that are complete will be able to provide some relief.

Colonel Jones responded to a question from Mr. Sawyer regarding the effects of supply chain impact and if the need for more funding from Congress may arise. Colonel Jones explained that due to inflation and labor the budget may increase, but at the moment it was too early to disclose a set amount.

Representative Hodges and Mr. Futch spoke in detail about the process that occurred after Florida Gas signed the agreement with DOTD.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Douglas Sherwin, Concerned Citizens for Drainage Improvement, 13327 Virgil Jackson Dr., Baton Rouge, LA 70818, (225) 614-1092, spoke for information only. He expressed his concerns about rising flood insurance costs and urged the completion of the canal to help with flooding issues.

Mr. Noel Hunt, 10090 Comite Drive, Baker, LA 70714, (225) 921-1562, spoke for information only. He expressed the need of urgency for project completion.

Mr. Robert Burns, Concerned Citizens for Drainage Improvement, 13454 Oak Trail Dr., Baton Rouge LA, 70818, (225) 955-4484, spoke for information only. He suggested to have separate meetings for the Darlington Reservoir in the future to cut meeting time for citizens who traveled to hear about the Comite River Canal. He expressed that he doesn't see a sense of urgency in completing the canal because there were no specific dates stated.

Mr. Stanley Fussell, Concerned Citizens for Drainage Improvement, 6816 Bryce Canyon Dr., Greenwell Springs, LA 70739, no telephone number provided, spoke for information only and expressed his concern about the completion timeline being pushed back.

Ms. Diane Womack, 21900 Mac Host Rd., Zachary, LA 70791, (225) 278-1803, spoke for information only. She questioned when FEMA would create new maps, to which Mr. Sawyer explained the process in depth.

Representative Hodges requested Mr. Bobby Duplanter, USACE, 7400 Leake Ave., New Orleans, LA 70118, (504) 862-1037, along with Mr. Sims, to testify regarding what can be done to accelerate the completion of the canal.

Mr. Sims stated that they have addressed all of the obstacles that are present and they have hit the hardest ones and that there should be no more unforeseen issues other than the possibility of weather but they are open to suggestions to make the process quicker.

Mr. Duplanter stated that there is no way that they can assure that there will not be unforeseen issues that may arise. He explained ways that they attempt to mitigate the risks from happening.

Mr. Dietmar Rietschier, ARBC, 3535 South Sherwood Forest Blvd., Baton Rouge, LA 70816, no telephone number provided, spoke for information only and explained the Darlington Reservoir and Amite River Basin Drainage & Water Conservation relationship.

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

VI. OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

VII. ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no announcements.

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Chairman Valarie Hodges

Comite River Diversion Canal Project Task Force

Date approved: _____