September 6, 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

I and my family for whom I speak, oppose the massive Slidell Levee Project described in the St. Tammany Parish Flood Control Feasibility Study which is currently the subject of public comment.

By way of introduction, my grandfather, Jacques Mossler, purchased approximately 600 acres of timberland one hundred years ago to the west of Slidell in the community of Bonfouca. In 1928, he hired an architect to design a Spanish Creole home on Bayou Pacquet, now located at 32272 Bayou Pacquet Road. He and my grandmother raised their four daughters, including my mother, spending full summers there. The house and adjacent property have remained in our family through five generations. Approximately twenty years ago, we rejected the overtures of commercial development and sold all but approximately 40 acres to the Conservation Fund. That property is now the Big Branch Preserve, managed by the U.S. Wildlife and Fisheries Agency.

My family has been committed to preserving the peace and beauty of the timber, wetlands, and scenic waterways of the area. We continue to maintain and enjoy the home my grandfather built, as a gathering place for generations of family. Our family has paid taxes in St. Tammany Parish for almost 100 years.

Our home has flooded once, in Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Within days of the storm, family members made their way to the property, camped out without power or running water, and began to clear the property and repair the home. We have returned it to its pre-storm majestic condition. Our home has survived the Great Depression, Betsy, Camille, Katrina and all the storm of the last 100 years. We now fear that we will not survive the United States Government.

Several months ago, we stumbled on the Slidell levee plans, by word of mouth from a neighbor. Family members began attending St. Tammany Parish Levee Board meetings, which consisted of little more than pep rallies for "flood control". Almost no details were presented and, accordingly, we made FOIA requests and contacted USACE representatives, and Congressman Scalise's office. We attended many meetings.

Early in this process, we learned that the initial plan was to build a levee running north-south on the east side of Bayou Pacquet directly across from our home. This would have a devastating effect on us, but we then received the comfort of an apology from a spokesperson from the USACE for this design. Thereafter, vague representations were made, but never an actual commitment that any levee would not be built in such a manner as to destroy our property. At a small meeting we attended which included USACE representatives, the St. Tammany Parish Levee Board Chairwoman, and private property owners, a Neel-Shaffer engineer consultant for the Board presented a drawing of an alternate levee alignment to the west of (and sparing) our property. Nevertheless, in the last iteration of the levee alignments documented in the Feasibility Study now before the public, the design has reverted to that for which only several months ago we received an apology. It is the design that would destroy our property. The irony is that we would remain outside of the alleged flood protection and be left to the forces of nature of any storm in which the new levee system would actually divert storm surge onto us.

We oppose this project for the following reasons.

The proposed project unnecessarily destroys private property.

The levee alignment described above, could easily be placed to the west of existing homes, including my family's, in property which is undeveloped and uninhabited. The current alignment can be expected to destroy homes on Bayou Pacquet Road, Keller Road and elsewhere. I have heard comments from the government that this would increase the cost due to mitigation required for the loss of wetlands. This concern rings hollow for a project which most believe would exceed $6 billion.

The proposed project would destroy marsh and wetlands.

Post-Katrina, the Louisiana Coastal Protection Restoration Authority successfully saved and replenished the Bayou Bonfouca marsh, with dredging from Lake Pontchartrain. I understand that the project cost $28 million. That same marsh would now be outside of the Slidell levee circle, vulnerable to every storm, and eventually lost. The same would be true of other wetlands which presently serve as a buffer from storm surge. The effect on the environment, fish and wildlife would have to be detrimental.

The proposed project would adversely impact the St. Tammy population west of Slidell.

Levees do not eliminate flood waters, they just move it elsewhere. The St. Tammany population west of Slidell, from Lacombe to Lake Maurepas, would fall victim to the diversion of flood waters westward. There is no representation on the St. Tammany Levee Board of residents outside of Slidell. I have to question whether those residents to the west have any meaningful knowledge of this planned project, and I doubt they have been provided, much less read, the Feasibility Study. Parenthetically, after its release several months ago, I copied it in its entirety, and it is just shy of five thousand pages long.

The remedy proposed by this plan is for the government to pay to elevate all occupied homes in the areas which, post-levee construction, would more than ever before, be exposed to flooding as a consequence of the levees they are outside of. Do they really want their homes raised? How disruptive would that be, how long would it take, how would it look, and who would do it? I have seen no answers to these questions in the five-thousand-page study.

The proposed project would still not provide complete protection for those inside the levee.

The levee design purports to create 14 feet maximum flood protection. At its highest, Katrina was almost twice that height. A 14-foot levee may be formidable, but not eliminate the risk from the worst storms.

The proposed project would exact too high a price to the quality of the environment and the beauty of the area.

Many are drawn to St. Tammany Parish for its scenic waterways and natural beauty. My family has, for five generations, enjoyed the peace of bayous such as Pacquet, Liberty, and Bonfouca. The Feasibility Study shows massive pumping stations, flood walls and flood gates, in addition to levees running through marsh and wetlands. Collectively, they are a scar and blight on the environment.

The proposed project would consume billions of dollars to protect Slidell in lieu of pursuing the remedy which would serve all of the Parishes in the Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas basin.

As far back as the aftermath of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, area engineers have opined that the best solution to protect the most people from flooding from natural disasters would be to erect barriers at the Rigolets and Chef Passes. Storm surge measures and structures to serve as barriers to waters which would otherwise enter Lake Pontchartrain might be expensive, one might guess even more than the $6 billion required for the Slidell levee circle, but the cost-benefit ratio would prove such a project to be more advantageous considering the vast number of residents in cities and towns around Lake Pontchartrain. Today, engineers continue to comment that the Barrier Plan which initially emerged with the USACE in the 1970s, should be resurrected. It is believed to have been defeated then due to perceived environmental damage. But environmental damage is, in any event, very much a factor in what is now proposed in Slidell.

We hope that these comments will be considered and acted upon in a responsible manner.

Sincerely,

Miles P. Clements

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