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Morganza bill overwhelmingly passes U.S. Senate

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HOUMA -- Local leaders celebrated a huge victory Monday night when a bill that includes federal approval of water-related projects throughout the nation -- including Terrebonne's much-anticipated hurricane-protection project -- sailed through the Senate.

The question now is whether President Bush will veto the bill, something he threatened to do after the cost of its included projects swelled to more than \$20 billion.

Local hurricane-protection advocates say they are preparing to fly to Washington, D.C., Wednesday to lobby for the bill, in the hopes that they can prevent a presidential veto and, if not, that they can curry the congressional votes needed to override the president.

Monday's vote marked the first time since 2000 that the Water Resources Development Act, or WRDA, passed both chambers of Congress, said Jerome Zeringue, executive director of the Terrebonne Levee and Conservation District. A version of WRDA is typically passed every other year.

The bill contains authorization for several major projects in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes, including the \$900 million Morganza-to-the-Gulf hurricane-protection system, 72 miles of floodgates, levees and a lock for the Houma Navigational Canal. The project, which has been in the works for almost 15 years, was stalled for half that time because of WRDA's failure to pass Congress.

"Today the Senate put an end to the seven-year wait for the authorizations necessary to invest in critical water projects for our nation," said Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., in a written statement.

For south Lafourche, the bill includes \$90 million for levee

improvements and a provision that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must ensure the region gets significantly improved flood protection, said Windell Curole, general manager of the South Lafourche Levee District.

The soon-to-be-installed Golden Meadow lock is also included, a step designed to ensure south Lafourche can get credit for construction work already done, as well as installation costs.

This will be a great help to the district, Curole said, because the project could cost between \$20 billion and \$24 billion. If President Bush signs WRDA into law, the federal government will share 70 percent of that cost.

"This WRDA bill is historic," said Sen. David Vitter, R-La., in a written statement. "Creating solutions to our coastal crisis and incorporating hurricane and coastal protections are vital to Louisiana's future."

But the triumph is tempered by veto threats made by the White House earlier this year after WRDA's price tag ballooned in conference committee.

The president and his backers say WRDA is packed with pork -- projects included by lawmakers to make voters back home happy. But WRDA advocates say the sticker shock is the result of having seven years worth of projects crammed into one bill.

Local officials and Louisiana lawmakers say they are working feverishly behind the scenes to avoid a veto.

"Given the severe need for hurricane-protection systems like Morganza-to-the-Gulf and the lengthy struggle the people of south Louisiana have endured to get to this point, I encourage the president to reconsider his position," said Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville. "If he chooses to continue to dismiss the important needs this WRDA bill provides for, I will pressure my colleagues in the House and Senate to stand firm and override his veto."

Local officials, including Zeringue, Curole, Sen. Reggie Dupre, D-Bourg, and Danny Walker of the Morganza Action Coalition, will fly to Washington Wednesday. One of their stated missions is to line up legislators to override the president's veto, if that proves necessary.

A two-thirds majority vote of both chambers of Congress is required to override a presidential veto, or at least 67 votes in the Senate and 290 votes in the House.

WRDA passed the Senate by a wide margin of 81-12. The House overwhelmingly approved it in a 381-40 vote earlier this year.

Zeringue said the wide margin would send a "strong message" to the president and prevent the veto from happening.

"I think things look very promising," Curole said. "If the vote holds on both sides, it will be a very easy override."

WRDA's passage is a significant step, but there is yet another obstacle to overcome even if the president approves it or Congress outvotes him. There is still the question of where the money to build Morganza will come from.

Congressional authorization provides no money but allows Congress, through a separate vote, to put up cash for projects included in the bill. Morganza advocates hope the federal government will provide \$600 million of the estimated \$900 million cost; the rest would come from state and local taxpayers.