

## Coastal annual plan stalls as senator pushes for votes on coastal authority board

By Mark Schleifstein

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The state's proposed \$566 million fiscal year 2019 spending plan for coastal restoration and protection projects has stalled in the Senate Natural Resources Committee as the chairman of the committee attempts to win approval of a bill that would give voting rights for two legislators now serving as non-voting members of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority board, according to a senior official with Gov. John Bel Edwards' office.

Sen. Norby Chabert's bill to change the membership of the authority was passed by the committee at its April 5 meeting in "placeholder" form, a move he requested, saying he wanted to continue to negotiate its wording with the CPRA and governors' office, which opposes the legislation.

At that meeting, Chabert, R-Houma and chairman of the committee, suggested the bill could also be amended before being considered by the Senate to also add the lieutenant governor to the board and remove one of the existing board members, which would keep the total number of board members at 20.

The annual plan has already been approved by the House Natural Resources and Environment Committee and the Transportation Committee. Chip Kline, deputy director of the Governor's Office of Coastal Activities, said the state had hoped to speed passage of the bill before the Legislature ends what's expected to be an abbreviated session to allow it to meet in a special session to consider state spending issues.

The failure of the committee to consider the bill on Thursday (April 19) sparked a Twitter storm of comments from environmental organizations questioning why legislators weren't moving the annual plan forward.

"It's curious what the holdup is," said Cynthia Duet, a senior official with the National Audubon Society's Louisiana office. "What concerns me is that because there's been a lot of talks about an abbreviated regular session, to deal with a special session, there's a need to move this quickly through the legislative process, so the coastal program can be funded by the beginning of the next fiscal

year, July 1."

The annual plan bill was held over in the Senate committee during the April 5 meeting at the request of state Sen. Rick Ward, R-Port Allen, who said he wanted more time to study the projects that would be funded by the plan.

His request followed discussion of Chabert's CPRA bill, which included several comments by committee members complaining that the Legislature could only vote to approve or deny the annual plan and the state's coastal Master Plan, and could not change their contents.

At the meeting, Chabert said the annual plan bill would be returned to the committee agenda the next week. But it was left off the committee agenda for the past two weeks. No reason was given by either Chabert or Ward during Thursday's committee meeting for its continued delay. Chabert did not respond to several requests for comments on the delay.

The authority now has 18 voting members and two non-voting legislative members -- Chabert, representing the Senate and Rep. Tanner Magee, R-Houma, representing the House. The voting members include the heads of most state agencies or their representatives, as well as several parish presidents and representatives of levee districts. The state agency heads are all appointed by the governor.

At the April 5 meeting, CPRA attorney David Peterson said the state believes giving legislators a vote would violate the state Constitution's separation of powers provisions, since the authority is part of the governor's office. But Chabert said there already were several boards within the governor's office that included legislators as voting members.

And State Sen. Gregory Tarver Sr., D-Shreveport, called Petereson's opinion "legal mumbo jumbo."

"From my perspective, to have a colleague, another legislator, involved in how these projects come about would be tremendously helpful," Ward said during that meeting. "Whenever you're dealing with billions of dollars and can only say yea or nay on a two or three-page resolution, and don't have a colleague on the board with a vote, that's a difficult thing, puts us in a precarious position."

At that meeting, Kline said CPRA provided numerous opportunities to legislators to participate in the planning process.

"We are consistently meeting with you in your offices about what your

specific priorities are in your areas and how that overlays the science," Kline said. "We will continue to give you a seat at the table." And, he said, the non-voting positions on the board also provide legislators with opportunities to offer their advice.

On Thursday, Kline said neither Chabert nor Ward have given a reason for the continued delays.

"We could be running up against a deadline for getting it approved in the regular session," he said, pointing out that the annual plan must still be returned to the Senate floor, where it will be passed on to the Senate Transportation Committee for another approval vote before the full Senate votes on the measure.

"The session is supposed to end on June 4, but both the speaker (of the House) and the president (of the Senate) want it to end earlier to get back to the fiscal matters that are of such great concern to the state," Kline said.