

## **IT'S OUR COMMUNITY TOO**

By E. R. DesOrmeaux, PE

In recent months, South Louisiana residents, especially in the New Orleans area – our friends, neighbors, and colleagues – have heard about the American Society of Civil Engineers through the voices of a few critics. As local engineers working to make New Orleans safer from future storms and floods, we would like to speak for ourselves.

The nearly 2,000 civil engineers in Louisiana, as members of ASCE, are all highly specialized professionals. We do our work and exercise our professional responsibilities to the highest ethical standard in keeping with our role as stewards of safety, infrastructure, and the environment.

Civil engineers provide professional work on all facets of our infrastructure...water and sewer systems, transportation, structures, and environmental projects.

But, our work isn't just about professional standards. For those of us living in New Orleans and the surrounding area, it is personal. We live and work here. Our members are parents, relatives, neighbors, and churchgoers. We care deeply about this city and its residents, and its fate is closely tied to our own. The decisions we make have as direct an impact on our lives as they do on our critics.

The Louisiana Section of ASCE has been active in a number of engineering causes to make Louisiana and its residents safer and more secure. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, our engineers worked to restore Louisiana's wetlands in order to stave off further coastal erosion plaguing Louisiana's shoreline. During the reauthorization of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), ASCE fought to require independent peer review of Army Corps projects to ensure they are sound. And, in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina & Rita, ASCE conducted a national fundraising initiative, provided computers, office supplies and volunteer assistance to impacted engineers, and continues to this day to provide scholarships and support to civil engineering students across the Gulf Coast who were affected by the storms.

A major concern in the past has been – and today remains – ensuring that New Orleans and South Louisiana residents have the protection they need from events with potentially serious consequences. A considerable amount of research and several considerable independent studies has been completed. Since a critic of our work has continuously advanced many misconceptions, we would like to tell you what we have done and where we sit today.

After Hurricane Katrina, the federal government convened an Interagency Performance Evaluation Taskforce (IPET) comprised of professionals from across the country and representing a number of disciplines to investigate the levee failures. Subsequently, ASCE formed an External Review Panel (ERP) to evaluate the work of the IPET.

We are proud of the ERP reports, which were justly critical of the Corps of Engineers, its decisions, and lack of priority on safety.

Some have proposed an "8/29 Commission" to review the levees failures. While we have no objection to such a Commission, in our view, the problems are already reasonably well defined, and now we must move forward and correct them. However, such a commission means an expenditure of dollars, which may be unnecessary. Additionally, if an "8/29 Commission" is the purported agenda of these individuals, then we are sure that our respected members of congress can debate its merits, and act accordingly.

All of us are aware that the New Orleans area today remains at risk, based on the plethora of information generated by the media, and professional sources. Much more must be done to correct the fundamental problems. We have... and will continue to advocate more aggressive hurricane protection measures for your families and ours.

As with any controversial issue, there are critics. We deem it unfortunate that a critic has chosen to concentrate their efforts on accusations against ASCE, rather than focus on the positive aspects of how they can foster and assist in positive results relating to hurricane protection. A well-intentioned critic could make positive contributions to the protection of the citizenry of New Orleans using the energy and passion for the issue that they have demonstrated to date.

While others across America have grown tired of hearing about our state's plight, and a few in Congress have expressed concern about the continuing protection efforts, those of us in the Gulf Coast continue to live in the shadows of the Katrina of the past, and the next unnamed storm of the future. .

In conclusion, the highly regarded member professionals of the Louisiana ASCE remain a source of independent expert advice to our local, state, and federal governments, and to private industry on a variety of engineering and scientific issues. We fully support a comprehensive and complete investigation of the proper technical and institutional issues related to the direction of future hurricane/flood protection for south Louisiana, as we support any other initiative to protect the safety, health, and welfare of our citizens, their property, and our valued infrastructure.

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