
Jefferson Parish Council votes to spend \$15 million of \$35 million BP settlement on coastal restoration, flood protection initiatives



Advocate staff photo by JOHN McCUSKER -- Ricky Templet

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The Jefferson Parish Council on Wednesday voted unanimously to dedicate **\$15 million from the parish's BP oil spill settlement** to coastal restoration and flood protection initiatives and to split the remaining \$20 million among four council districts.

The vote was a compromise reached after about four months of debate on whether to give all the money to the districts that were hit the hardest by the 2010 oil spill or to spend it on projects throughout the parish and pay raises for government employees.

The resolution the council approved was drafted by Councilman Ricky Templet, whose district includes the coastal communities of Grand Isle and Jean Lafitte. It calls for the parish to direct \$5 million to each of the council's five districts and \$10 million to fighting coastal erosion and flooding.

The resolution specifies that Templet will dedicate his district's \$5 million to erosion and flooding projects, bringing the total for those purposes to \$15 million, and that all of that money will be spent in the two districts closest to the Gulf of Mexico.

Templet said the \$15 million will be used to pursue at least \$45 million more in matching funds from state coastal and flood protection authorities. Millions more could be available from the federal government, he said.

An ordinance will be introduced later to give Templet's resolution the force of law.

The cash influx is the result of a lawsuit the parish filed against BP to recover sales tax revenue that was lost in the wake of the oil spill. While the settlement was for more than \$53 million, more than \$18 million of that went to attorneys' fees and special parish districts dedicated to sewage, lighting and fire protection.

Councilman Ben Zahn had suggested using some of the money for cost-of-living raises for parish employees. He dropped that proposal after the administration said the raises, which will take effect next year, will be financed by leaving some vacant positions unfilled, increasing health insurance costs and lowering pension contributions. The parish's 2016 budget will total \$607 million.

Some audience members at Wednesday's meeting made a last-minute push to persuade council members to dedicate all of the BP money to coastal restoration and flood protection efforts in lower Jefferson.

Scott Eustis, of the Gulf Restoration Network, cited a study that recently found the birth and survival rates for bottlenose dolphins in Barataria Bay are down from what they were before the disaster and likely will take decades to recover.

Grand Isle Mayor David Camardelle said fishing and shrimping hauls are still not what they used to be before the spill. Tar balls from the spilled oil continue washing up on the beach in Grand Isle, he said.

"If there had been an oil spill in Kenner, the mayor of Grand Isle wouldn't have come to that table and tried to get a nickel," Camardelle said. "I can promise you that."

However, Jean Lafitte Mayor Tim Kerner seemed resigned to the vote the council was about to take. "I would rather the money (for lower Jefferson) be more," Kerner said. "But I know the votes are not there."

Councilmen Templet, Chris Roberts and Elton Lagasse had supported dedicating all \$35 million to coastal restoration and flood protection initiatives before Wednesday's compromise, while Zahn, Paul Johnston and Cynthia Lee-Sheng favored using at least some of that money for needs throughout the parish.

Councilman Mark Spears remained largely neutral in the debate, at least in public.