



4.22.18

Commentary

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana



Earth Day – Article 6 Progress Report and Recommendations for the Future

Earth Day celebrates the awesome natural beauty of our planet and brings our attention to what we can do to protect our environment. Today is a perfect time to reflect on the beauty and importance of Louisiana's coast, and our commitment to protect and restore it. Now is also a good time to review the state's progress in meeting the recommendations of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana and to look ahead at what can be done better.

In 2016 PAR published [The New Louisiana Purchase: Building Trust with Sound Coastal Investment Policies](#). The report made specific recommendations on how to improve governance and invest coastal funds wisely. The best way to improve Louisiana's coast and the public's confidence in coastal policy makers is to take actions based on strong science and good engineering. PAR's report focused on good management practices, financial responsibility, accountability and efficiency.

Gaining Ground

One of the core recommendations in the PAR report reflected a wide consensus of the state's general approach to coastal efforts, including a focus on the state Master Plan that guides projects and policies.

2016 Recommendation:

The governor should ensure that the Executive Director and Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Chair will provide leadership and accountability so that the Master Plan and Annual Plans are developed and executed based on the intent of the governing laws and done so in a manner not driven by politics, but rather in the best interest of the state, based on the best available science and technology.

The state has a clearly defined, legislatively-mandated procedure for setting coastal priorities: a planning process that results in a comprehensive Master Plan that must be updated every five years. When The New Louisiana Purchase was published, PAR cautioned that even with those statutory and constitutional safeguards in place for coastal funding, the governor's strong influence over coastal policy and investment decisions left room to prioritize politics over coastal restoration.

The governor and CPRA showed responsible leadership in developing Louisiana's 2017 Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast, as did the previous administration and its leaders in developing the preceding plan. CPRA developed this most recent Master Plan by building on the work of the previous plans and using more advanced tools to select the most effective projects. Some of the significant improvements made since the 2012 planning process include:

- A project evaluation that incorporates up-to-date science and data regarding Louisiana's current coastal environment and the changes expected over the next 50 years.
- The use of advanced modeling tools to evaluate the projects considered for the 2017 plan.
- The inclusion of additional data such as using a larger geographic area and a wider range of ecosystem outcomes, including additional fish and wildlife species.
- The incorporation of key details to hydrology and flood risk models.

We also commend the Legislature for their approval of the 2017 Coastal Master Plan and for preserving the science-based project selection and priority process as the plan moved through the process of adoption.

The 2018 Annual Plan, an extension of the Master Plan, provides three-year revenue and expenditure projections and maintains the project priorities of the Master Plan. PAR urges the Legislature to do the right thing, as they did by approving the 2017 Master Plan, and avoid playing political football with the 2018 Annual Plan.

2016 Recommendation:

The governor and his administration should develop new models of stakeholder engagement that improve the transparency and communication with the public during the project development, selection and implementation phases. An effective stakeholder engagement model should improve communication and provide more information and means of providing the information in an easily understood manner resulting in a higher probability of project implementation success.

Stakeholders reported concerns about inadequate transparency and communication with the public during the development of the 2012 Master Plan - specifically the project development and selection process.

CPRA responded by implementing a new and effective stakeholder engagement model with the 2017 Coastal Plan. Building upon their existing partnerships, CPRA solicited input from coastal stakeholder advisory

groups, focus groups, federal and state agencies, key subject matter experts, and the public through new outreach efforts. As part of this new engagement initiative CPRA:

- Facilitated 20 Community Conversations to gather input from coastal communities.
- Expanded stakeholder engagement to include community and landowner focus groups.
- Held public hearings on the draft Master Plan that were streamed live online and archived for remote viewing.
- Launched the [Master Plan Data Viewer](#) and a [Story Map](#) to promote public engagement prior to finalizing the Master Plan.
- Translated the Master Plan executive summary into French, Spanish and Vietnamese and translated the Master Plan overview video into Vietnamese.

CPRA conducted a full court press to engage more stakeholders during the master planning process. It is refreshing to see an area of policy where Louisiana continues to improve plan after plan. The citizens of Louisiana should expect to advance yet again in 2022.

Room to grow

One of the best ways to continue incremental development is to acknowledge those areas where there is still work to do. As with any large complicated endeavor, there is always room for improvement. While the state has made important strides over previous years, a few areas still need attention. Progress on the two recommendations below from 2016 has not been as evident.

2016 Recommendation:

CPRA should leverage the new IT system, LAGov, to improve transparency and real-time public reporting regarding the state's investment in coastal restoration and protection. Further, the state should leverage Louisiana's Transparency and Accountability (LA TRAC) portal and online state spending database by including CPRA expenditures and contracts on the portal. Currently, there are a significant number of vendors' payments generated outside of the state's system and not defined on LA TRAC.

CPRA's Annual Plan could still use some work. While the Annual Plan includes a budget of projected expenditures, it still does not include retrospective reporting on actual expenditures from previous years. Nor is there an online tool in which stakeholders can track expenditures.

Progress has been made with the ongoing implementation of LaGov at CPRA. CPRA has reported improvements that have streamlined the agency's day-to-day operations of its financial accounting, purchasing and project management. CPRA efforts to use the new LaGov system to provide more transparency are encouraging.

As the agency continues to address this issue, CPRA should prioritize providing retrospective reporting in the Annual Plan and better tracking of expenditures online.

2016 Recommendation

The state's practice of using the Coastal Protection and Restoration Fund as a pass-through to balance the state's operating budget should be stopped. The governor and Legislature should avoid raiding, supplanting, redirecting and using budget gimmicks that result in reducing the funding dedicated to and available for investing in coastal protection and restoration. With the RESTORE Act and other federally regulated programs comes a higher level of scrutiny as to how the funds are expended, as well as more stringent and frequent audits. Questioned costs are subject to recapture.

Most of the money the state spends on coastal projects comes through the Coastal Protection and Restoration Fund, a constitutionally protected account that draws its money from the state, the federal government, various settlements related to the BP oil spill, mineral revenues from oil companies and other sources.

In 2014, PAR raised an alarm over the planned use of the Coastal Fund as a kind of fiscal washing machine to churn one-time non-coastal revenue into general operating dollars for the state budget. Fortunately, the Legislature saw fit to stop using the Coastal Fund for that kind of budget gimmick.

The state Constitution says that once money is placed in the Coastal Fund, it must be spent on projects consistent with Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan. However, there is an exception to the rule. To balance a mid-year budget deficit, the governor has the constitutional prerogative to skim a small portion of cash from a variety of state funds, including the Coastal Fund. A legislative committee must approve this action.

Historically, the state has safeguarded the Coastal Fund from such budget cuts. However, in February 2015, under the previous administration and Legislature, Louisiana for the first time raided the Coastal Fund to address a mid-year budget deficit. Another sweep came in fiscal year 2016. The most recent sweep was in December 2016, when \$3.1 million was taken. With these sweeps, the Coastal Fund was raided of money that was to be spent on coastal restoration projects and management. These sweeps represent poor coastal policy as well as the poor fiscal practice of utilizing non-recurring revenue for the state's recurring expenses.

Conclusion

Policymakers, stakeholders and citizens should all expect more in the future. For our part, PAR will continue to serve as a watchdog over the coastal program. We will investigate the roadblocks that prevent projects from moving forward. PAR will issue recommendations on what should be done to remove these roadblocks and speed up progress.

This Earth Day, citizens should remain mindful of the responsibility of our state leaders to wisely invest coastal funding to protect and restore our coast and earn the public's confidence. This requires recognizing the positive efforts that have been made. It also requires vigilance and constant review to ensure improvements continue. The work done by CPRA so far provides reasonable hope for the future.

For more information, contact:

Steven Procopio, Policy Director

225-926-8414, ext. 224

steven@parlouisiana.org