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# Commentary

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana



## Earth Day – Article 5 The Crucial Role of Local Partners

Local governments have the crucial role of providing the first line of defense for their parishes in preventing flooding and coastal land loss. They, along with federal and state partners, have the grave responsibility for protecting citizens, property and livelihoods. Transparency in policies, decision-making, planning and procurement can ensure accountability and make a difference in preventing devastation. The state can help this effort by encouraging those local projects that are consistent with Louisiana's coastal master plan.

The coastal parishes are receiving or are in line to receive new sources of money from the Deepwater Horizon settlement, federal revenue sharing from offshore drilling, and state matching funds.

One of the larger shares of new revenue is the federal RESTORE Act's handling of administrative and civil penalties from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The coastal parishes will receive 30% of Louisiana's Direct Component allocation based on a formula. The funds can be used for a range of eligible activities, including restoration and protection, mitigation and conservation management. These uses are consistent with the state's master plan. The RESTORE funds also can be used toward workforce development and job creation, improvements to impacted state parks, infrastructure projects, planning and administrative costs, and tourism and seafood promotion. While these uses might be worthwhile, they are not central to the master plan.

Direct RESTORE Parish Allocation		
Parish	Gross Allocations Available	Percent
Acension	\$ 707,675	2.4%
Assumption	\$ 271,353	0.9%
Calcasieu	\$ 1,479,053	5.1%
Cameron	\$ 612,829	2.1%
Iberia	\$ 743,862	2.6%
Jefferson	\$ 3,486,597	12.0%
Lafourche	\$ 2,294,861	7.9%
Livingston	\$ 970,525	3.3%
Orleans	\$ 2,079,387	7.1%
Plaquemines	\$ 5,250,416	18.0%
St. Bernard	\$ 2,819,893	9.7%
St. Charles	\$ 395,873	1.4%
St. James	\$ 220,518	0.8%
St. John the Baptist	\$ 326,446	1.1%
St. Martin	\$ 603,477	2.1%
St. Mary	\$ 525,694	1.8%
St. Tammany	\$ 1,613,216	5.5%
Tangipahoa	\$ 992,729	3.4%
Terrebonne	\$ 2,891,469	9.9%
Vermilion	\$ 883,139	3.0%
<b>Total Parishes Allocation</b>	<b>\$ 97,230,040</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

As a condition of receiving the funds, the RESTORE Act requires that the chief executive of the eligible parish shall certify to the governor that the parish has completed a comprehensive land use plan. The RESTORE Act imposes other conditions, including that "the project or program is designed to restore and protect the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, coastal wetlands, or economy of the Gulf Coast."

A project should be "selected based on meaningful input from the public, including broad-based participation from individuals, businesses, and nonprofit organizations," according to the RESTORE Act guidelines. A natural resource protection or restoration project must be based on the best available science.

Further, the project and the awarding of a contract must be "consistent with the standard procurement rules and regulations governing a comparable project or program in that State, including all applicable competitive bidding and audit requirements." The fund recipients must "develop and submit a multiyear implementation plan...."

Of the 20 Louisiana parishes eligible for direct RESTORE grants, 12 have submitted their plans to the Department of Treasury. The types of projects submitted but not yet approved for funding include: planning, restoration, marsh creation, waterway debris removal, hurricane protection levee, drainage and flood risk reduction. These projects promote coastal efforts or reduce the risk from flooding.

Other submissions are less related to coastal protection and restoration: boat launch repairs, workforce development, a fishing pier and a public seafood market. These other uses are allowed under RESTORE and might be appropriate for the parishes that submitted them. However, the state should encourage and assist those parishes that pursue projects that are consistent with the master plan.

Parishes that have yet to submit their plans should develop them by working with citizens and stakeholders in an open process. Public input is required and can contribute meaningfully. Businesses, organizations and individuals will have perspectives and insight that can prevent mistakes in the planning phase before they become problems. Meetings with the public should not be a pro forma box to check off in a federal

application. Public engagement is a chance for decision makers to gain knowledge and the trust of the community.

The efforts of coastal parishes are crucial to the success of the restoration efforts. To get the maximum return on investment, parishes should coordinate efforts with other parishes and with the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA). Parishes that have not submitted plans should look for opportunities to improve our coastal infrastructure. To incentivize this coordination, CPRA has included \$100 million for the Parish Matching Opportunities Program in its First Amended RESTORE Plan. Only those local projects that are consistent with the state's master plan should be considered for a matching grant. Limited dollars must be focused on the state's priorities.

The selection of projects is only the beginning. As these new funding streams become available, local governments should ensure implementation has integrity. That includes a transparent procurement process and avoidance of sweetheart deals. Local governments should make sure they have an effective auditing program to ensure that the funds are spent how they are intended to be spent, especially for the significant new funding streams from the RESTORE Act, federal revenue sharing, and state matching funds.

When these funds result in capital improvements, local authorities should have a plan for how they will pay for the associated operation and maintenance of these assets and they should enter into an agreement with the state to do so.

All government entities should strive for more accountability and transparency, but this issue is particularly urgent when it comes to coastal spending. Louisiana will receive billions to repair and improve the coast and with those dollars come an obligation to spend the money wisely and accountably. Local governments can do this by using a strong procurement process and following up with a robust audit regime. The state can help by working with locals through the matching program to leverage dollars used for the master plan projects. Insisting on implementation standards is the best way to fix our coast and maintain the confidence of Louisiana's citizens.

## Recommendation

The Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority should promote local coastal restoration efforts by making matching grants for local projects consistent with the state's master plan. This policy will help leverage limited state coastal dollars by partnering with locals.

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