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Restoration of bayou detailed at meeting; Cypress trees could be key shield for 9th Ward

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Restoring the wetlands and cypress groves of Bayou Bienvenue means hurricanes will have a much tougher time flooding the Lower 9th Ward.

Instead of relaxing at home on a Saturday afternoon, a group including a college professor, neighborhood leaders, an Army Corps of Engineers project director and a New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board official opted instead to deliver that message in person to several dozen mostly college-age spectators.

They detailed some of the steps they are taking to help restore the bayou's cypress trees and 27,000 acres of wetlands that were killed by saltwater intrusion before the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet was shut down this summer.

The program at Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School's cafeteria was organized by the Environmental Defense Fund. Only a few audience members appeared to live in the Lower 9th Ward.

Harvey Stern, an official from the S&WB, detailed a plan to use sediment dredged from the Mississippi River to re-create wetlands in the bayou area, which is sandwiched among the Lower 9th Ward, Industrial Canal and Gulf Intracoastal Waterway in New Orleans.

Sewage treated at a plant near Caffin Avenue would be used to spur the growth of bald cypress and water tupelo trees. The trees would help disrupt storm surges that could cause water to overtop levees alongside Lake Pontchartrain, the Industrial Canal and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

During Hurricane Katrina, no levees protected by wetlands were overtopped, but levees in the Lower 9th Ward were, causing catastrophic flooding.

Stern said the human waste in the treated sewage could cause growth in the bayou just as animal waste in manure causes growth on American farms. "Most people think of sewage as something you want to get rid of," Stern said, but the treatment plant "can also be a place where marsh is created."

Project work in the area near the plant should start in November, and S&WB officials are working to get permission from neighboring landowners to spur growth in a wider area.

Bayou Bienvenue is also part of a much larger ecosystem damaged by the MR-GO that the Army Corps of Engineers is trying to repair, corps official Gregory Miller said. The MR-GO, a failed shipping channel, might have

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caused saltwater levels to rise as far west as Lake Maurepas and as far east as Hancock and Harrison counties in Mississippi -- an area of 6,000 square miles, he said.

Restoring the cypress trees in Bayou Bienvenue is the only way to completely recover acres of storm surge-breaking wetlands that disappeared in that area, Miller said.

Austin Allen, a landscape architecture professor at the University of Colorado at Denver who has focused much of his work on the post-Katrina recovery of New Orleans, urged officials to incorporate Bayou Bienvenue into the same city planning district as the neighboring Lower 9th Ward. After his discussion, he suggested residents write or call City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis, urging her to push for joining the areas.

Allen, who helped students from his university build an observation deck over the bayou in February, said the fate of the bayou's cypress recovery effort will directly affect everyone in the Lower 9th Ward. Separating the two gives the impression that the neighborhood and the bayou have conflicting interests, he said.

"You have to balance the social with the science," Allen said.

Residents of the Lower 9th Ward also pledged their support for the plans for restoring the bayou.

Pam Dashiell said she knows the importance of deterring storm surges, which caused Lower 9th Ward residents agony four years ago.

"We are vulnerable here," Dashiell said. "We are surrounded by water."

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