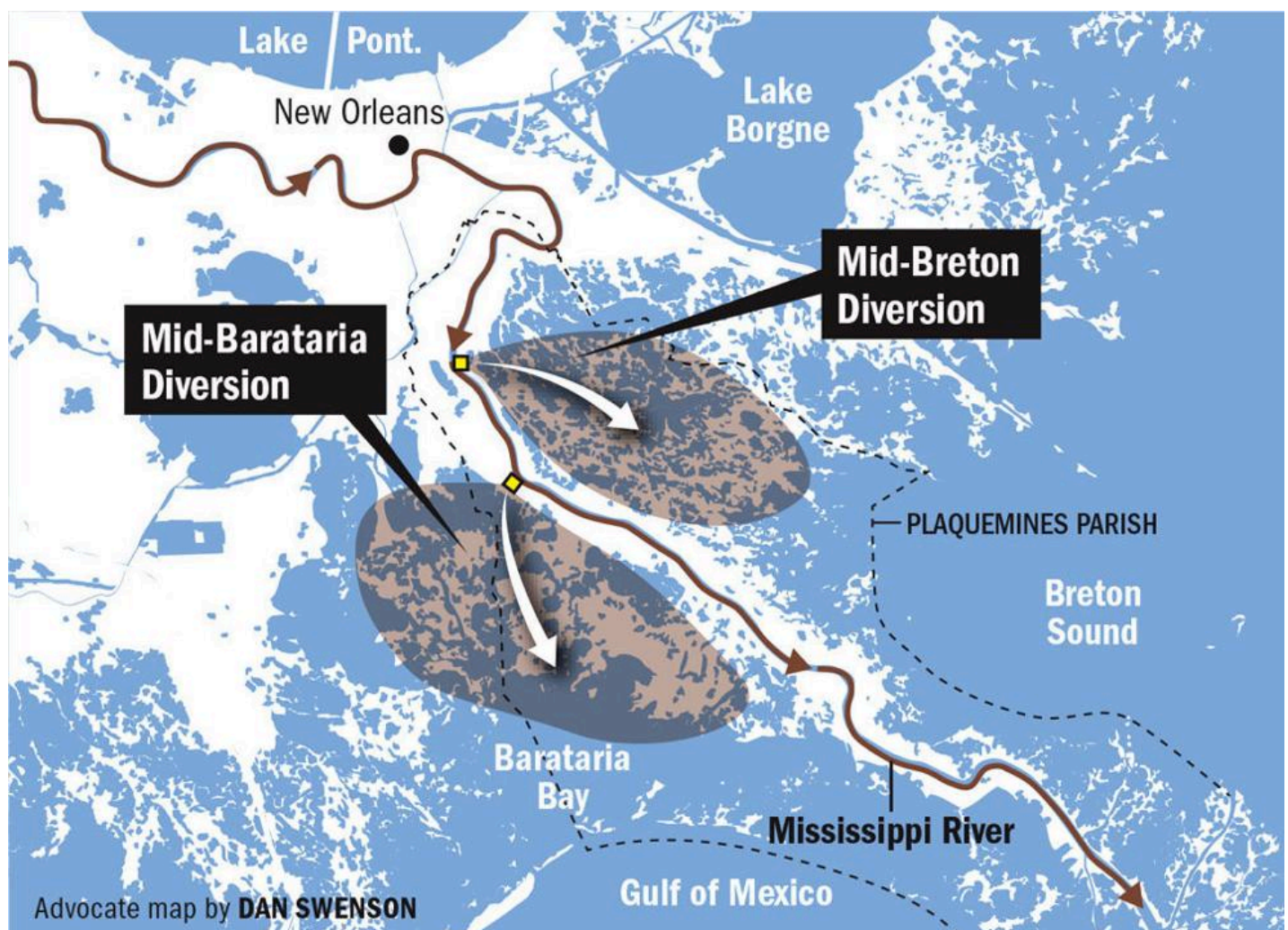


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Plaquemines leaders warn about effects of river diversions on fishing industry

BY FAIMON A. ROBERTS III | froberts@theadvocate.com

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A roomful of Plaquemines Parish business leaders confronted state officials Tuesday with pointed questions about the cornerstone of the state's master plan for coastal restoration: two sediment diversions

planned in the parish at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

The projects — the Mid-Barataria and Mid-Breton sediment diversions — are among the most ambitious projects in the state's 50-year, \$50 billion master plan for fighting the land loss that has plagued the state for more than eight decades.

Both projects entail cutting holes in the levee and channeling river water out into the nearby marshes, bringing along with it large amounts of land-building sediment, much of which has been diverted downstream since the river levee system was built in the first half of the 20th century. Both are to be built in Plaquemines Parish: Mid-Barataria on the west bank, Mid-Breton on the east.

The projects have broad support from state officials and environmental groups, with some of the latter hailing them for using the river to help fight coastal land loss.

The state has even persuaded the federal government to accelerate the permitting process for Mid-Barataria, the larger of the two projects. The federal permitting process could now be finished sometime next year or in 2020.

But some leaders in Plaquemines, especially those in the fishing industry, are opposed to the project. They worry that even if the diversion is operated only a few times a year, a few days at a time, pushing that much fresh water, sediment and pollutants through fertile grounds for shrimp, oysters and fish will harm the fisheries or destroy them altogether.

Some of them have pointed to the algae blooms that are often visible in Lake Pontchartrain after the Bonnet Carre Spillway is opened, pouring river water into the lake. They say that after the algae blooms die, they create areas of extremely low oxygen, or hypoxia, that can lead to fish kills.

Plaquemines Parish President Amos Cormier also has complained that no one from Plaquemines is on the board that governs the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, the agency in charge of implementing the master plan.

Critical questions fueled an at-times pointed exchange Tuesday between members of the Plaquemines Association of Business and Industry and Johnny Bradberry, chairman of the CPRA board.

Speaking at the group's lunchtime meeting, Bradberry tried to assure the members that the diversions are necessary but that other methods of landbuilding, such as dredging, are not being discounted.

He also described some \$6.6 billion in planned projects in Plaquemines, saying the state's "commitment to this parish is significant and real."

But some were not convinced.

"This is our parish; this is our land," said Judy Tesvich, whose family is in the oyster business. River water diversions will "kill oysters, fish and shrimp. Everyone in the seafood industry knows that," she told Bradberry.

Bradberry noted that an extensive environmental impact study is required during the permitting process, but said that until those data have been collected, he isn't sure what the impacts would be. Once the data are in, however, he said, CPRA officials would work to mitigate and minimize impacts on the seafood industry.

Other questions concerned the diversion's impact on salinity in the marshes and whether the state has gotten an exemption from the Marine Mammal Protection Act allowing it to impact the habitat of dolphins in Barataria Bay. Bradberry said it has not but that it would be allowed to meet the act's requirements "in a different way."

Cormier said he was relieved to hear Bradberry talk approvingly about dredging but said the diversion projects are still his biggest concern.

"When you start talking about 400 feet wide and 20 feet deep," he said, referencing early estimates for the size of the cut in the levee, "that's a man-made bayou."

He also expressed skepticism that the diversion would in fact be operated only intermittently and wondered why the project is being fast-tracked.

"We are the ones who are going to be affected," he said. "We are the ones who are downstream."

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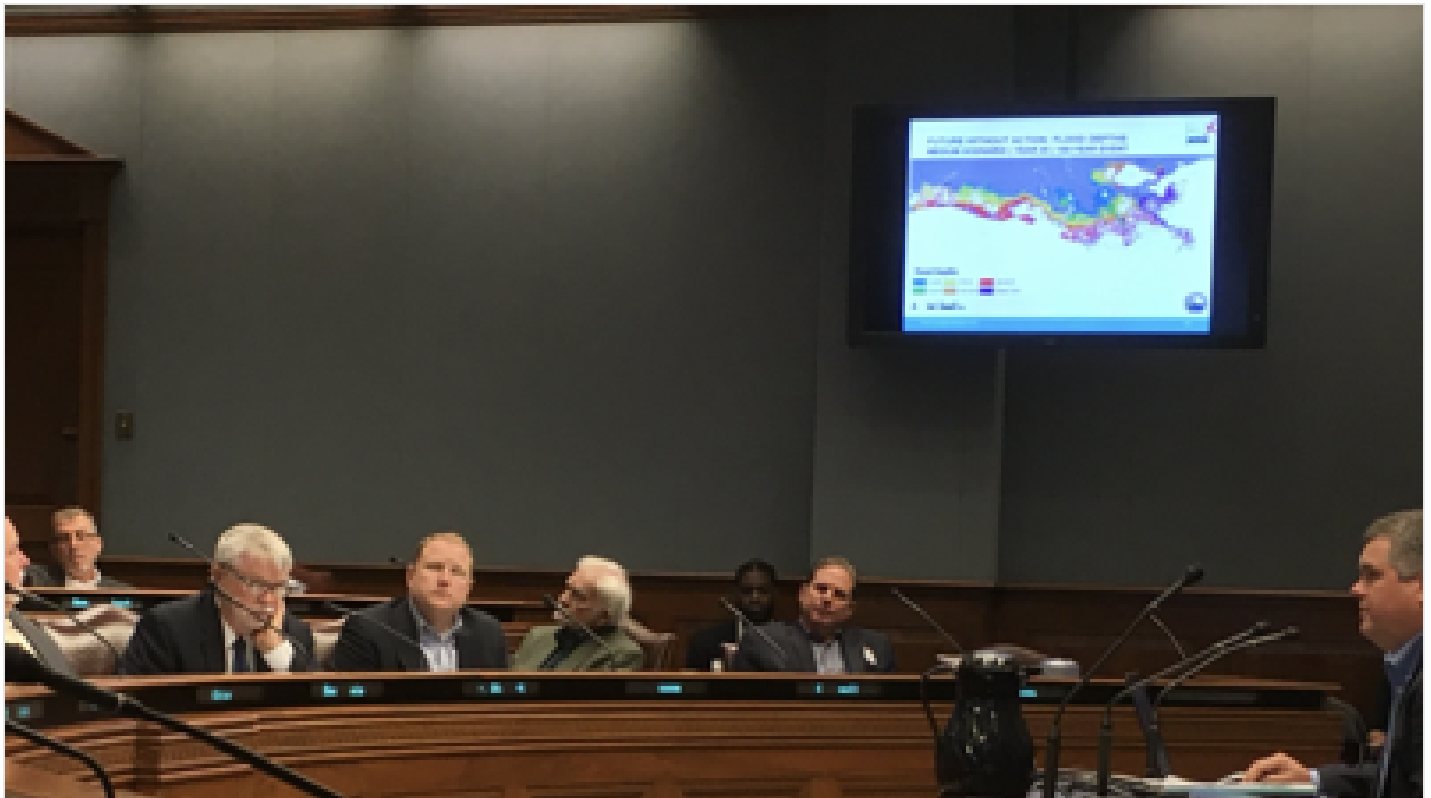
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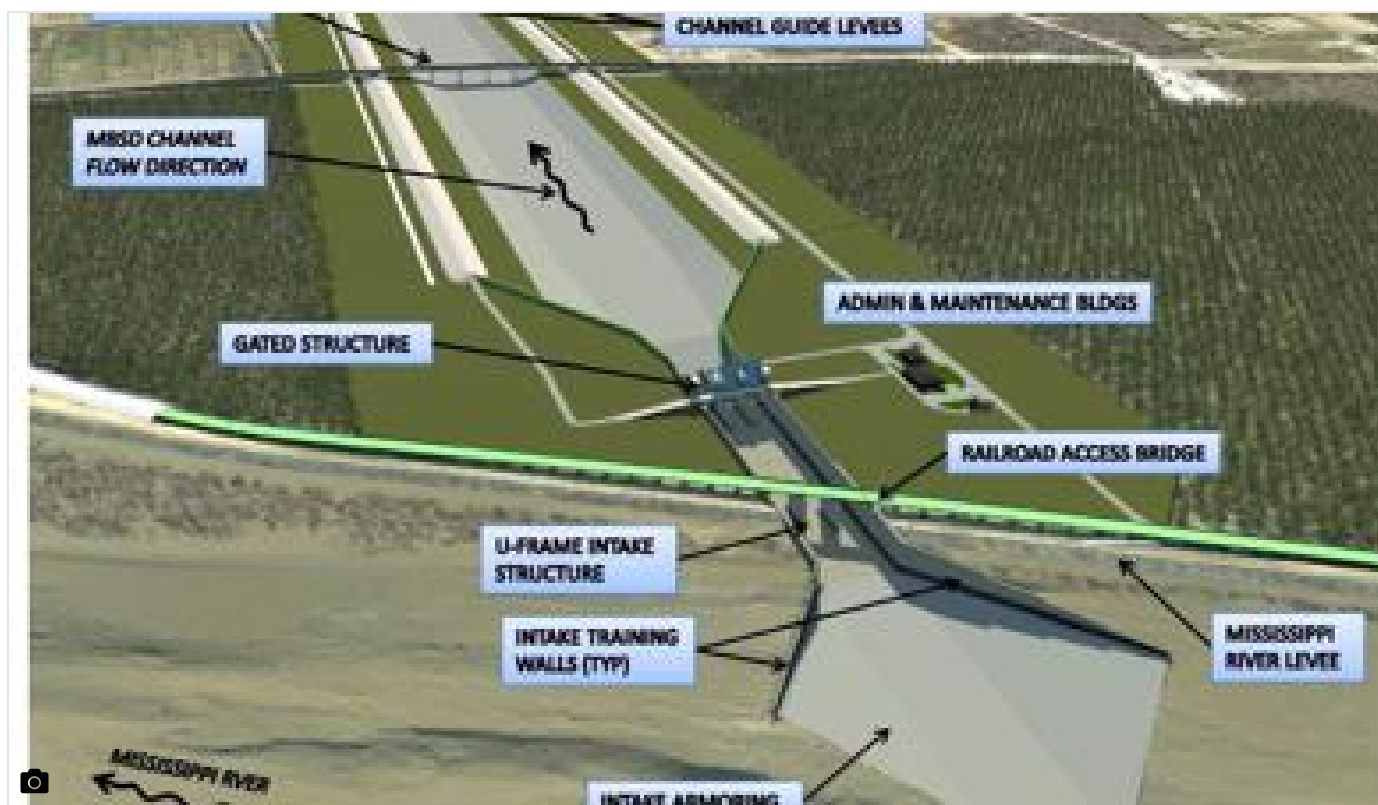


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