

B L O G G I N G

After the Storms: Blogs Step Up Response to Hurricanes

THE BLOG BRIEF

BY LUKE E. DEBEVEC

Special to the Legal

As the Gulf Coast struggles to recover from the multiple traumas inflicted during and after Katrina and Rita, numerous blogs and other Internet resources are addressing the legal ramifications of the storms and their aftermath.

VOTING RIGHTS

A blog run by FairVote, a voting rights advocacy organization, directs readers to a working paper on the political effects of Hurricane Katrina (www.fairvote.org/blog/?p=36). Among the conclusions posted to the blog are that several Louisiana districts may now violate “one person, one vote” standards, “case-workers may be strained beyond their resources,” “African Americans may have lost the strength to elect a candidate of choice in the 2nd district, making Louisiana liable under the Voting Rights Act,” and “incumbents in the 3rd and 6th districts will face tough if not futile re-election campaigns.”

Relatedly, the blog called “Paper Chase” (<http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/paperchase>), operated by students and faculty at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, reports that on March 16, the Justice Department approved New Orleans’ municipal elections scheduled



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<http://blogbrief.blogspot.com>.

for April 22. The approval was given despite protests from the city’s black community that the vote could disenfranchise minority voters.

According to the blog, “The NAACP had promised that if the DOJ did not set up satellite voting stations in major centers outside Louisiana it would take steps to bus in former New Orleans residents; it has already ... opened 15 voter assistance centers in nine states to help with what it called the ‘complex’ absentee ballot process.” (See <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/paperchase/2006/03/justice-department-clears-new-orleans.php>).

Edward Still, an attorney with more than 30 years of experience in redistricting, voting rights and election contests, administers “VoteLaw” (www.votelaw.com/blog), a blog dedicated to these issues. VoteLaw has been compiling media reports on natural disasters’ impact on voting rights since shortly after the hurricanes struck. A recent entry shows that the Southern University Law Center in Baton

Rouge, La., will be hosting a two-day symposium on protecting voting rights following Katrina.

LEGISLATION, REGULATIONS

Katrina Legislation Tracking (<http://katrinalegislation.blogspot.com>), a blog that does exactly as its name implies, provided day-by-day analysis of legislation proposed during the Louisiana Special Session, which ended on Feb. 17. Notable bills that passed concerned revisions to levee districts, future emergency procedures, absentee ballot rules, new bond initiatives, rules for placement of insurance settlement funds into interest bearing escrows and rules prohibiting homeowner’s policies from automatically excluding coverage due to a declared disaster. However, the special session did not accomplish all of its goals.

Ernest Svenson, a New Orleans attorney and chairman of the Louisiana State Bar Association’s technology committee who was forced to ride out Hurricane Katrina in the city, characterized the session as a “new low water mark (pun intended) for gubernatorial prowess.” At his legal technology-focused blog, “Ernie the Attorney” (www.ernietheattorney.net/ernie_the_attorney), he listed on Feb. 14 what he believes to be notable failures of the session. These include the “defeat of a bill to set up voting centers for displaced New Orleanians,” failure to create a single levee board for the

metro New Orleans area, and the failure of a bill to “consolidate the seven New Orleans property assessors (elected officials) into one office.”

As for the federal role in rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, Stephen Griffin posted to “Balkinization” (<http://balkin.blogspot.com>) with sharp words for the tepid efforts made thus far. Reacting to President George Bush’s touting of \$85 million federal aid, he explains, “In Louisiana, we are heartily sick of hearing this figure.” This is because that figure refers to the total amount of money authorized — not necessarily spent — for all of the states affected by Katrina and Rita, and it is well short of another “pledge to rebuild New Orleans.”

Additionally, a “substantial fraction” of this amount is for ordinary FEMA expenses, while almost a quarter is “for tax credits, mostly for business, which are of dubious value given the most substantial problem facing the state — housing.” Finally, a large part of the remainder is devoted to “three necessary, but not very productive, items: picking up debris; fixing some important infrastructure like bridges and roads; and temporary housing.”

Griffin goes on to tout initiatives of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, whose proposals have been stymied by the Bush administration, and

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termed a "heavy-handed federal solution." To Griffin, however, "the alternative to the Baker bill appears to be mass foreclosures, no chance at any comprehensive plan, and a terrible plague of housing blight."

The "Hurricane Law Blog" (www.hurricanelawblog.com), established by McGlinchey Stafford, is intended to serve as a "central repository for current information about hurricane-related legislation, litigation, and regulatory issues affecting Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama." Recent entries report on New Orleans' courts' "fast-tracking" of thousands of civil cases related to the hurricanes, and a Department of Housing and Urban Development regulation that extended by 120 days a moratorium on foreclosures in certain areas, under certain conditions.

The University of Mississippi School of Law, in conjunction with the University of Mississippi Civil Legal Clinic and volunteers, created the Katrina Legal Relief

Web site (<http://katrinalegalrelief.org>), compiling general overviews of a wide range of legal issues arising out of the hurricanes. Covered topics include landlord and tenant law, mortgage law, property law, insurance law, FEMA and other state and federal benefits, education law, employment law, family law, consumer issues, banking issues, immigration law, criminal law, transportation law, environmental law, bankruptcy and tax law.

For insurance law information, Anderson Kill & Olick has contributed pro bono resources to the United Policyholders' Hurricane Damage Insurance Claim Help Library (www.unit-edpolicyholders.org/claimtips/tip_katrina.html). This Web site provides a wealth of information on insurance, including claims tips for homeowners and businesses, general information on submitting insurance claims and buying insurance, answers to frequently asked questions, and a glossary of common insurance terms.

Educational efforts have also been launched by local, state and national bar associations. For example, the Mississippi Bar Association's Disaster Relief site (www.msbar.org/hurricane-katrina-disas-

ter-relief.php) lists, among other things, legal assistance hotlines, a disaster training manual for Mississippi lawyers, materials on rebuilding a damaged law practice and preparing for future disasters, and summaries of recent state and federal cases.

Likewise, the American Bar Association provides a clearinghouse of information for people seeking legal assistance and attorneys interested in pro bono opportunities. Through the information on this Web site, (www.abanet.org/Katrina), lawyers can begin providing pro bono legal aid to the victim's of hurricanes Katrina and Rita through the Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas state bar associations, as well as the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division's Legal Assistance Program.

Although the hurricanes struck more than half a year ago, their effects on the Gulf Coast are still being felt — and are still being revealed. As the Web sites highlighted above show, the Internet can provide practitioners with marketing and volunteer opportunities as well as immediate access to and analysis of judicial, legislative and executive agency developments that may affect the Gulf Coast. •

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