

Cabinet duo hopes to lift city

Both pledge to help expedite recovery

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Staff writers

When Larry Scurich showed off his repaired Chalmette home this week to U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, the 83-year-old man said it had taken 3 1/2 years to restore his flood-ravaged ranch-style house because of a series of bureaucratic obstacles.

Donovan's response was simple.

"I apologized," he said Friday. "I said it was unacceptable for him to go through what he had gone through. ... It's just not acceptable to see that kind of attitude ... from Washington."

Finding ways to speed up hurricane recovery was a goal of Donovan's two-day visit to the area with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

The trip, which concluded Friday, "put a spotlight on the lingering recovery," Napolitano said. "We take this on not as a project, but as a passion to do everything we can to move things along and expedite the recovery."

To that end, Napolitano said she is going to take "a fresh look" at the much-maligned Stafford Act, which sets rules for disaster relief and emergency assistance. Officials at all levels of government have complained that the act is outdated and unhelpful.

In particular, they have griped that it provides only for reimbursement, even from people and governments that might have lost everything and, as a result, cannot afford to put up any money for repairs.

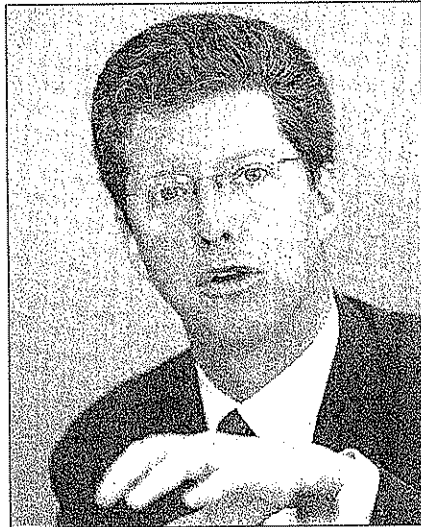
A re-examination is necessary, she said, because officials have used the Stafford Act as justification for recovery-related actions — and in some cases, inaction.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," Napolitano said. "We need to look at what might not be in the Stafford Act."

As head of homeland security, Napolitano oversees the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which has been criticized not only for responding poorly to the emergency, but also for delaying recovery — in part through overly literal readings of the Stafford Act.

Praise for FEMA nominee

During the Cabinet members' meeting with reporters and editors at The Times-Picayune, Napolitano expressed confidence in Craig Fugate, whom



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HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan says he was startled after seeing post-Katrina images of New Orleans' sprawling camps of homeless people.



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Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano promises to take 'a fresh look' at the federal law that sets rules for disaster relief and emergency aid. Officials have called the Stafford Act outdated and unhelpful.

President Barack Obama nominated Wednesday to lead FEMA. Fugate, who has years of hurricane experience as the head of Florida's emergency-management office, accompanied Donovan and Napolitano on Thursday on their visit to hard-hit parts of New Orleans and Chalmette.

Although Napolitano said Fugate's expertise will be an asset, she also said everyone needs to understand what FEMA's role should be. As former governor of Arizona, Napolitano described herself as a "consumer of FEMA."

Going to the federal agency first "is not a correct expectation" of what FEMA is supposed to do, Napolitano said, explaining that the agency should intervene only if an emergency overwhelms local and state officials.

"FEMA comes in as a backup," she said, "and that's when something is of such a nature that it merits a disaster declaration and the resources of the city and county would be spread beyond the breaking point."

Katrina met those criteria, Napolitano said, describing the monster storm as "something beyond ... what anybody had ever dealt with."

"I hope it's unique in our lifetime," she said.

During Obama's successful presidential campaign, he promised to bring control of Katrina recovery into the White House.

The form that will take isn't clear yet, Napolitano said. But, she said, "the issues here have the president's attention."

Gauging housing situation

Even though the Obama administration is less than two months old, the White House is intimately involved with New Orleans decisions, Donovan said, citing the Disaster Housing Assistance Program, which his agency extended by six months soon after he took office.

The program, which was scheduled to expire March 1, received scant attention from his predecessors, Donovan said, even though the 81,000 Katrina evacuees across the country had been on the verge of losing the aid and even though Congress had allotted money to move most eligible residents from temporary assistance to long-term Section 8 vouchers.

"We need to respond in a different way," Donovan said.

On Thursday, after touring the hard-hit areas with Napolitano, Donovan visited the housing program's local office. As of this week, Housing Authority of New Orleans officials said they had awarded vouchers to about 1,000 of nearly 10,000 households under that office's purview.

When Donovan left New Orleans, he headed to Houston to visit the program's office there.

Donovan, who previously led New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, mentioned a few times during his New Orleans visit that he and his colleagues in New York had been startled by images they saw of New Orleans' sprawling camps of homeless people on Claiborne Avenue and at Duncan Plaza.

Part of a \$50 million grant he announced Thursday will help provide housing assistance and services to more than 750 disabled people pulled from those camps, abandoned houses and other squalid conditions by caseworkers from UNITY of Greater New Orleans.

The Recovery Act money that HUD allocated last week includes \$2.25 billion for a tax-credit assistance program. That sum could help launch a long line of affordable-housing projects in New Orleans that are stalled because they had relied on capital raised by low-income housing tax credits that have few interested buyers.

Other Recovery Act money awarded to the state can be used to speed progress on the so-called Big Four sites, where the agency plans to build mixed-income communities in place of the B.W. Cooper, C.J. Peete, Lafitte and St. Bernard developments.

"The Big Four are very much on my radar screen," Donovan said Friday, calling them "as important as any redevelopment project in the country."

Both Cabinet members expressed optimism about New Orleans' future.

"You've got some competitive advantages that are critical for you and for the nation to rebuild," Donovan said. "If you take the long view, New Orleans has a lot of assets that are important to the country."

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