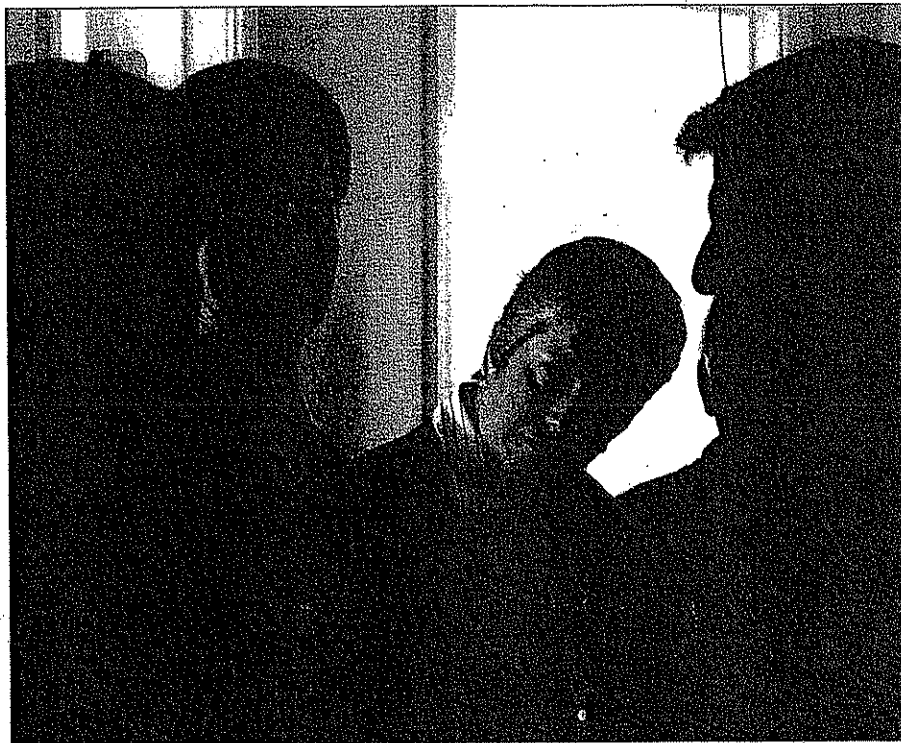


Obama aides vow to speed recovery

Millions of dollars in grants headed to state



TED JACKSON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, center left, and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano are briefed by U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, left, during a tour of a home in Chalmette. Listening are U.S. Rep. Anh 'Joseph' Cao, far left, and Gov. Bobby Jindal, right.

By John Pope
and Katy Reckdah
Staff writers

Declaring their frustration with the slow pace of hurricane recovery, two members of President Barack Obama's Cabinet announced hundreds of millions of dollars in grants Thursday in New Orleans as part of their promise to speed up the process.

"What we have seen today makes us disturbed — angry, even — to see the numbers of the families living the way they have," Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan said at a news conference with

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano after a morning tour of hard-hit areas.

As the result of a bus ride that took them to Southern University at New Orleans, Chalmette and the 9th Ward, "we are getting a view of what has not yet happened and what needs to happen," Napolitano said.

In a police-escorted motorcade, the visitors saw houses and businesses that had been repaired, houses and businesses that apparently had not been touched since Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, and buildings reduced to nothing more than stacks of lumber. As the convoy crossed into

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► **Erad Pitt**
lobbies Washington
for aid for
New Orleans, A-3

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money has Obama
administration
committed to N.O.
area? See list, A-9

"We pledge to you our partnership for a new beginning in New Orleans and across the Gulf."
 SHALUN DONOVAN, HUD Secretary

Federal officials are 'disturbed' by visit

GRANTS, from A-1

New Orleans from St. Bernard Parish, the entourage passed a hand-lettered sign on white poster board on the side of a ravaged house: "PLEASE HELP OUR COMMUNITY."

Obama nominee attends

Standing next to Napolitano at the outdoor news conference was Craig Fugate, whom Obama nominated Wednesday to lead the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is part of Napolitano's department. The appointment of Fugate, the head of Florida's emergency-management office, requires Senate confirmation.

"We pledge to you our partnership for a new beginning in New Orleans and across the Gulf," Donovan said to applause from residents and civic activists.

"This is the day we have been waiting for," said Martha Kogel, executive director of UNITY of Greater New Orleans. "It's desperately needed for a lot of people."

The news conference was in the middle of Morrice Duncan Street, which had been cleared and blocked off for the occasion. The street is part of Abundance Square, a section of the redevelopment of the former Desire public housing complex.

A block from the podium where Donovan and Napolitano spoke, a handful of protesters shouted demands for low-cost housing and an end to the demolition of public housing complexes.

No one responded to them, but Donovan later promised to work hard to restore more affordable housing.

"We're going to do everything we can," he said.

Sharing the stage with Donovan, Napolitano and Fugate were U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La.; Gov. Bobby Jindal; Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu; New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin; U.S. Reps. Anh "Joseph" Cao, R-New Orleans, and Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville; state Rep. Karen Carter Peterson, D-New Orleans; and Maj. Gen. Hunt Downer, Louisiana's assistant adjutant for the Army National Guard.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., and U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, did not attend because they stayed in Washington for votes, representatives of their offices said.

Administration's first trip

The trip was the first Cabinet-level inspection of hurricane damage since Obama took office in January. While Napolitano and Donovan did not mention President George Bush, who has come under heavy criticism for the laggard federal response to Hurricane Katrina, they sought to make it clear that the region's recovery will be a top priority of the Obama administration and that cooperation among government agencies will be the norm.

After all, Donovan said, "the water didn't know political boundaries. It didn't respect them."

In approaching the problems surrounding hurricane recovery, Napolitano said she asked herself a series of "why" questions, including "Why has this taken so long?" "Why are we using this form?" and "Why are we changing things that people had relied on?"

"This will not be the last time I am here," she said, "and this will not be the last time I ask 'why?'"

Residents share stories

On the tour, the first stop was SUNO, where Chancellor Victor Ukpoko led the visitors through the quiet Park Campus, which is still undergoing repairs.

At mid-morning, the motorcade swooped onto Veronica Drive in Chalmette to visit



PHOTOS BY TED JACKSON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

U.S. Rep. Anh Joseph Cao, left, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Gov. Bobby Jindal, SUNO Chancellor Victor Ukpoko, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan and Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu tour Southern University at New Orleans on Thursday.



Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, left, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, right, and others tour the Chalmette home of Lawrence Scurich, second from left. The home was rebuilt with the help of the St. Bernard Project.



SUNO Chancellor Victor Ukpoko leads the visitors through the Park Campus, which is still undergoing repairs from Hurricane Katrina damage.

RECOVERY HELP

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano Thursday announced a series of recovery-related cash commitments:

- HUD has accepted Louisiana's \$438 million plan for long-term disaster recovery. The money will come through the agency's Community Development Block Grant program.
- HUD is providing \$23 million for housing older people and people with disabilities in hurricane-affected areas.
- FEMA will underwrite the rebuilding of New Orleans' police stations in the 6th and 7th districts and a firehouse in eastern New Orleans.
- The agency will furnish \$12 million to rebuild St. Bernard Parish's Waste Water Treatment Plant.
- FEMA will give \$2.9 million for the last repairs to Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans.
- FEMA is extending its relocation assistance program until May 1. Eligible families can be reimbursed for as much as \$4,000.
- HUD and Louisiana will launch a five-year, \$60 million program for about 1,000 disabled homeless people and families. Most of the money will be spent in the New Orleans area.

Larry Scurich, an octogenarian who will soon move back into the house where he raised three children and where his wife, Dorothy, died 12 years ago after a struggle with cancer.

Scurich wept as he told officials how much he loved the ranch-style house where he lived for more than 40 years. He could not bear to lose it, he said, but he could not have repaired it without the help of the St. Bernard Project, which repairs homes in a parish where Katrina's floodwaters damaged every building.

Scurich's house will be the 200th the program has com-

pleted since August 2006, fueled by grants, donations and a rotating crew of volunteers totaling 11,000, said Gretchen Wieland, the program's development coordinator.

Project officials were eager to show off their handiwork to the visiting officials because, she said, "there's still a lot of work to be done."

At Abundance Square, the last stop, Geraldine Thompson, 78, sat quietly and watched the commotion with her grandson and great-grandson, Richard Thomas and Richard Thomas Jr.

Thompson raised 13 children in the Desire complex, which held 1,860 apartments in 262 brick buildings. She liked it but said she prefers the neat landscaping and better maintenance at Abundance Square. "It feels more like homes, rather than a housing project," her grandson said.

The 73-unit Abundance Square and its neighboring development, the 34-unit Treasure Village, were built a few years before Hurricane Katrina. They were rebuilt after the storm using insurance proceeds and low-income tax credits. Construction is under way on 166 apartments in an adjacent development, Savoy Place.

A busy afternoon

After the news conference, the two Cabinet members separated for the afternoon.

Donovan visited HUD's field office and the Disaster Housing Assistance Program office on

the West Bank, where housing officials are scrambling to move 15,000 households out of the program or into subsidized housing assistance within the next six months.

He also walked through a privately owned, publicly subsidized apartment complex in eastern New Orleans. About 3,000 storm-damaged apartments, many in that part of the city, are still moldering.

Napolitano took a helicopter tour to inspect the coast and assess the vulnerability to terror attacks of offshore pipelines, which have become exposed as the coastline recedes. She also

met with first responders and higher education officials.

Napolitano also visited the beleaguered local FEMA office which is being investigated because of employees' complaint of harassment and misconduct.

Donovan and Napolitano then attended an early evening roundtable discussion with business and political leaders at Galier Hall.

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