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Locals to pitch 'oilfield ingenuity'

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HOUMA — A local engineer and business owner plan to use "a little south Louisiana oilfield ingenuity" to build a barrier along Terrebonne Parish's historical island chain to fend off encroaching oil from BP's leak in the Gulf of Mexico.

Kenny Smith, president of Houma engineering firm T. Baker Smith, said the plan is to string together rigid booms that would block the miles-wide passes between barrier islands.

Smith said he and Chet Morrison, chairman of Chet Morrison Contractors, are devising a protection plan acceptable to the Coast Guard and BP.

At the request of Parish President Michel Claudet, Smith will present the idea during the Terrebonne Parish Council's Budget and Finance Committee meeting, which starts at 5:30 p.m. Monday. The meeting, and others set for this week, will be held in the second-floor meeting room of the Government Tower, 8026 Main St., Houma.

The plan would involve anchoring booms in a V-shape to collect the oil and keep it out of inland marshes. Covering 24 miles of passes, Smith said, is an easier fight than trying to cover vast inland shorelines with conventional booms, which are flexible and require constant maintenance.

There is roughly 50 miles between Raccoon Island and Port Fourchon. Twenty-six is island and 24 is open water, he said. Sand barriers are being built in Plaquemines Parish, Smith said, but Terrebonne's barrier-island passes are likely too deep and wide for such berms to be sustainable.

"It's like building a sand castle in the waves," Smith said. "So we've been concentrating on how do we control those passes."

-- Claims against BP. The council may begin searching for specialized attorneys to handle damage claims related to the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion and oil spill.

Councilman Billy Hebert is suggesting the council seek proposals now from lawyers, both local and out-of-town. When asked what potential claims Hebert said "whatever would come up, be it in terms of environmental, be it terms of accidents that would occur. At least we would be prepared to go out and fight anything that could occur."

Terrebonne's District Attorney's Office has already filed suit against BP, but that claim is specific to environmental and wildlife damage.

Hebert's proposal will be considered at the Policy, Procedure and Legal Committee meeting at 5:45 p.m. Monday. His proposal would hire attorneys on a contingency-fee basis instead of an hourly rate, Hebert said. A contingency fee could be a flat monthly rate or a percentage of the resulting award, he said.

-- Drainage. The council will consider changing the engineering agreement with T. Baker Smith for designing improvements in the drainage area known as 1-1B. The additional design work will increase the contract by \$23,000 and is set for a vote at the Public Services Committee meeting at 6 p.m. Monday. The drainage system

covers homes and businesses in Lisa Park, Broadmoor, Oakshire, Bayou Gardens Boulevard, Gray and northern Coteau and Bayou Blue.

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-- Offshore drilling. Following the Deepwater Horizon explosion, President Obama enacted a ban on new deepwater drilling until all deepwater rigs undergo safety inspections. The move has upset local business owners and government officials because of its potential to cripple the local economy. The council will consider sending a formal request to Obama asking him to reverse the ban. The resolution will be voted on at the council's Natural Resources and Coastal Restoration Committee meeting at 6:30 p.m. Monday.

-- Condemnation hearings. More than 50 properties are up for condemnation at a special council meeting set for 5:30 p.m. Tuesday. The properties are split between those from the parish's nuisance-abatement program and FEMA's program for hurricane-damaged homes.

-- Thompson Road. Councilman Joey Cehan is requesting an update on plans to extend Thompson Road. That discussion will be held during the council's regular meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday.

The plan is to create a new route between Grand Caillou Road and La. 56 just south of the Houma Airbase.

At an 8-foot elevation, the road would also act as a flood-protection barrier for neighborhoods near Woodlawn Ranch Road, the airport, Roberta Grove and Mechanicville, which flooded during Hurricane Ike in 2008 and Rita in 2005. The road would run parallel to Woodlawn Ranch Road and connect Grand Caillou Road to La. 56 near the new Bayou Drive Bridge.

Neighborhoods in the area are prone to storm-surge flooding from Lake Boudreaux, which is about 10 miles south of the airport.

In March, parish officials said construction was at least six months from starting.

To view the full council agenda, visit tpcg.org.

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