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On Gulf Coast, Praise for Obama, Criticism of Visit

By [CAMPBELL ROBERTSON](#)

NEW ORLEANS — At Willie’s Auto Repair in the Lower Ninth Ward, just a few blocks from a school where [President Obama](#) is scheduled to speak on Thursday morning, Mr. Obama received Jerome Bienaime’s endorsement.

“President’s doing a good job as far as I’m concerned,” Mr. Bienaime, 71, said. “And he ain’t even been there a year.”

Mr. Bienaime’s sentiment was generally shared among officials and residents in interviews on the eve of Mr. Obama’s first visit to the area since taking office, a marked contrast to local opinion about President [George W. Bush](#).

But the praise for Mr. Obama’s work has, in recent days, been eclipsed by criticism of his visit.

Mr. Obama, who visited the city five times during his presidential campaign and attacked Mr. Bush for his response to [Hurricane Katrina](#), is spending only a few hours here — at the [charter school](#) and at a campus of the University of New Orleans, where he is holding a town-hall-style meeting — before flying to San Francisco for a fund-raiser. He is not visiting the storm-ravaged areas in Mississippi.

Representative Steve Scalise, a Republican from southeastern Louisiana, held a news conference in which he called Mr. Obama’s visit a “drive-through daiquiri summit.” Representative Gene Taylor, Democrat of Mississippi, wrote a critical five-page [letter](#) to the president. Mississippi editorial writers are [not pleased](#) either.

“The theater’s all wrong,” said Lawrence N. Powell, a professor of history at Tulane who describes himself as an otherwise strong supporter of the president. “I know he’s got a lot going on, but I think this needed to be

approached differently. You can't multitask a world-historical tragedy.”

Others say presidential visits do not matter as much as the work that is being done. “Bush was here a lot of times,” said Paul Rainwater, the executive director of the state-run Louisiana Recovery Authority, who praised the approach of the current administration over the previous one. “I would say it's more important to have your cabinet secretaries down here.”

According to the White House, there were 22 visits by senior administration officials to New Orleans or nearby Biloxi, Miss., from March to August — 13 of them by cabinet secretaries.

Nick Shapiro, a White House spokesman, said: “The president has been to New Orleans five times since Katrina and has done most of the things people are saying they want him to do. What he hasn't done is hold a public event where he can hear directly from the people of New Orleans, so that is what he is doing on this trip — which of course will not be his last.”

Both [Republicans and Democrats say](#) federal officials have generally been flexible and responsive to the area's needs.

“I was extremely glad that they were able to go so quickly to get things done,” said [Representative Anh Cao](#), the Republican whose district includes nearly all of New Orleans.

Mr. Cao complimented the administration's ability to extract money — roughly \$1.2 billion — from bureaucratic tangles that had been holding up projects for years. Changes, like dropping the [deadline for vacating FEMA trailers](#), have been made when necessary, and [new systems](#) have been set up to resolve longstanding financing disputes.

Mr. Cao did raise concerns, echoed by others, that there were still problems in coordination among agencies. And some are disappointed that more federal stimulus money was not spent here, largely because of the federal spending formulas. (The White House said that more than \$1 billion from the stimulus program was directed to New Orleans.)

But the issue that just about every New Orleanian brings up first is flood protection. It is, as in most matters of

engineering and basic survival, a nonpartisan issue. But it is a politically difficult one: the restoration of coastal wetlands, essential to the protection of the region, is extremely expensive, and the returns can be long in coming.

The [Army Corps of Engineers](#) is at work on a \$14.3 billion plan to have improved flood protection in place for the city by summer of 2011, including an enormous storm-surge barrier now rising east of the city. But residents are angry about the strictures that keep progress slow — including a lengthy project approval process mandated by Congress for work along the coastline, and a lack of Congressional financing for what many officials believe are necessary, if costly, improvements to corps plans in the city itself.

The administration has set up a variety of groups to tackle the issue of coastal restoration, including the Ocean Policy Task Force, which is meeting in New Orleans next week, and another group dedicated solely to Gulf Coast restoration. The creation of these groups, which consist of senior officials from different federal agencies, has been welcomed by state environmental officials and coastal advocates who prefer them to the heavily criticized Army Corps of Engineers.

“Everybody’s saying the right thing,” said Garret Graves, who leads the state’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. But Mr. Graves said it was too early to tell if the administration will act on these groups’ recommendations with the urgency the situation demands.

Some residents, and not just officials and advocates, are concerned that Mr. Obama will not understand the severity of the coastal problem without taking a look at it himself.

Curtis Merricks, 55, a retired city worker who was brought up in the Ninth Ward but moved to another part of the city after Hurricane Katrina, said that was his priority.

“Most people just about got their money,” Mr. Merricks said. But “if we don’t do nothing about coastal wetlands, we’re going to go through this again. He needs to go down in the swamp; that’s where he needs to go. He should have went to Mississippi, too. He’s just riding through and riding out.”

