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Redirected storm aid angers NOLA Catholics

Bruce Nolan Religion News Service | Jun. 16, 2009

NEW ORLEANS -- The Archdiocese of New Orleans said it is seeking federal permission to redirect federal storm compensation money all over the metro area, not just the city's urban core that was hard-hit by Hurricane Katrina.

The disclosure comes after Catholic parishioners in two relatively poor, hard-hit areas of New Orleans were shocked to learn from the government, not the church, that the archdiocese had sought permission to divert almost $11 million in compensation from their wrecked schools to school construction in two suburban parishes.

The resulting outcry has prompted church officials to launch an effort to explain their decisions for allocating storm compensation offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Key church officials, including retiring Archbishop Alfred Hughes and Bishop Shelton Fabre, met recently with the Rev. John Harfmann, pastor of Corpus Christi/Epiphany Parish, one of the communities whose members were offended by the diversion of FEMA money out of their parish, said archdiocesan spokeswoman Sarah Comiskey.

In addition, the archdiocese began circulating a public memo summarizing its options for using FEMA compensation money and its own considerations in deploying the money.

Among the memo's main points:

- Under FEMA rules, storm compensation money cannot be "banked" by the parish it came from, but must be used to build or repair similar facilities either there or elsewhere -- with a 25 percent "penalty" if used elsewhere.
- Archbishop Alfred Hughes "insisted from the beginning that the first priority was to make sure that all needs were met in the most affected civil parishes."

In moving storm dollars around, the church sought permission to shift some dollars from the city to the suburbs, as well as some from the suburbs to the city "in the best interests of the entire archdiocese," Comiskey said.

Although the archdiocese does not plan to reopen some storm-damaged schools, parishioners and some public officials, including New Orleans City Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, have asked the archdiocese to refurbish the old schools with FEMA money and launch new community service programs from the sites for the benefit of their neighborhoods.

Comiskey said the archdiocese felt that the thinly populated parishes could not sustain financial support for such programs over the longer term.

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