

Corruption blocks New Orleans recovery

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Thursday, 13 August 2009 15:26

William Jefferson, a former Louisiana Congressman who represented parts of New Orleans, was recently convicted in federal court for accepting more than \$400,000 in bribes. Jefferson could be sentenced to more than 20 years in prison for his crimes. Though it only took the jury five days to deliver the verdict, it will take tax payers much longer to pay off the trial's debt; a sum that includes far more than court costs.

The Gulf Coast has progressed slowly and steadily since it was hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. In New Orleans, however, many residents feel that more can – and should – be done. There are still nearly 66,000 unoccupied homes in the city, school enrollment is at 78 percent of its pre-Katrina levels, home sales are down 39 percent from four years ago and rents have increased by 40 percent in that same time period.

Charity Hospital, one of the city's largest state-run hospitals, was damaged heavily by Katrina. It has not reopened and it doesn't look like it will. Many of the city's poor and elderly were able to receive free and low cost medical services there; they are now redirected to hospitals that are much farther from their homes. Like the hospital, many local businesses – dry cleaners, car repair shops and more – didn't reopen after the storm, resulting in a lack of services to a city that has so much need. Most importantly, elected officials from the area still cannot definitively say whether or not New Orleans' levee system is strong enough to protect the city from a major hurricane.

Jefferson did not hold office when he was convicted – he lost his seat in a December race, after he was indicted. But his corruption case is not an isolated one. According to the FBI, Louisiana ranks third in the nation in public corruption cases. It's maddening to think that, in the midst of all that remains to be done in both the state of Louisiana and in the city of New Orleans, local politicians will abuse their power and ignore their constituent's needs in favor of fattening their pockets.

With Louisiana, New Orleans in particular, struggling to rebuild itself nearly four years after Hurricane Katrina hit, the local government simply doesn't have the time or resources to continuously prosecute corrupt public officials. The state's attorney is doing his job by cracking down on corruption. The politicians need to step up and do their part by putting the needs of the people ahead of their own greed.