

Evacuation studied in Louisiana

State trying to prevent traffic backups as seen during Hurricane Ivan

Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. — Though the 2004 hurricane season ended last month, state officials still are dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan, a storm that did little direct damage to Louisiana but caused traffic snarls, a flood of complaints and a sweeping review of evacuation procedures.

State police, the state Transportation Department and the Louisiana National Guard all are working on improvements to Louisiana's response to the threat of hurricanes, hoping to avoid another frustrating vehicle crawl like the one spawned by the September storm.

Residents from the New Orleans area, the southeastern coastal parishes and other neighboring Gulf Coast states, all fleeing the unknown path of Ivan, took as long as 10 hours to drive the 70 miles from New Orleans to Baton Rouge on the interstate highways. Baton Rouge had 26 hours of traffic congestion because of the evacuation, according to transportation experts.

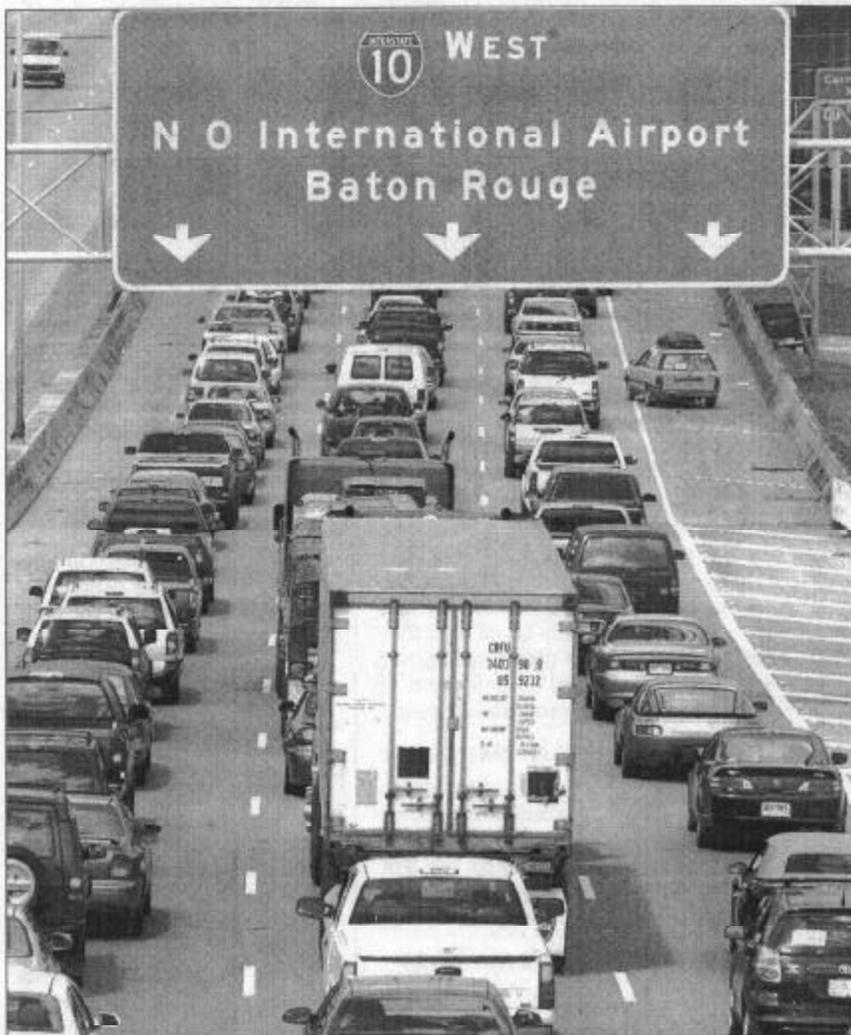
Gordon Nelson, assistant secretary of operations for the state Department of Transportation and Development, outlined many planned changes to a Senate committee recently:

- The state police will place tow trucks along some of the heaviest evacuation routes, so vehicle breakdowns and accidents don't further tie up traffic.

- Transportation officials will put more signs along heavily traveled roads to suggest alternate routes.

- Tolls will be immediately suspended on the two toll bridges in the New Orleans area, after reports that money still was being charged six hours after evacuation orders during Ivan.

- Evacuations will be more closely coordinated between state and local officials to stagger the



CHRIS GRAYTHEN/European Pressphoto Agency

Residents fleeing New Orleans as Hurricane Ivan approached in September had to contend with bumper-to-bumper traffic on the interstates. The 70-mile trip to Baton Rouge took as long as 10 hours.

times to avoid an immediate spill onto the highways all at once.

- A traffic control center involving the Transportation Department and the state police will work solely on traffic problems during the preparations and evacuations for a hurricane, and more helicopters will monitor the traffic situation by air.

But lawmakers on the Senate Select Committee on Homeland Security said state officials need to improve their communication with local law enforcement and officials like mayors and parish presidents to quickly move residents out of a hurricane's path and to safety.

"I'm hearing sheriffs scream bloody murder, 'We're not in the

loop,' as they should be. We've just got to do a better job," said Sen. Robert Barham, R-Oak Ridge.

Col. Henry Whitehorn, the head of the state police, said that he knows about the problems and that state officials were working to improve communication systems with local officials.

"If we don't bring those communication systems together, we're spinning our wheels," said Sen. Gerald Theunissen, R-Jennings.

Mr. Theunissen said local sheriff's deputies often were in a better position to manage traffic on the roads because they can get into place quickly.

Mr. Nelson said the transportation department also hoped to dis-

tribute state maps outlining the evacuation routes, including alternate paths, and do public service announcements about them so residents know the different roads they can use to leave town.

Consultants have finished their review of the state's "contra-flow" plan, in which inbound lanes on interstates are reversed from Kenner to LaPlace, according to Mr. Nelson.

Col. Jay Mayeaux of the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness said the final "after-action" report on how to improve Louisiana's response to hurricanes probably will be complete in late January. It will go to the governor for review.