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## 'We have to do quality work'



STAFF PHOTOS BY SCOTT THRELKELD

Repair work remains to be completed in the sanctuary at St. Augustine Catholic Church on July 9.

### Hard hit by Hurricane Ida, St. Augustine Church in Treme still shuttered amid repairs

BY LEAH CLARK

Staff writer

When Hurricane Ida swept through southeast Louisiana nearly two years ago, it left destruction in its wake. As residents slowly returned to the area, some found their homes, schools, workplaces and houses of worship damaged.

St. Augustine Catholic Church in Treme was hit particularly hard.

The iron cross perched on top of the 182-year-old church's steeple was bent over sideways, pushed by Ida's winds. Windows were blown out. Water damage crumbled plaster that fell in chunks from the walls and columns. The church's rectory and parish hall also suffered damage.

"It was just shocking, the feeling of numbness," said the Rev. Emmanuel Mulenga, the Roman Catholic church's pastor of nine years.

The church wasn't in any condition to serve its parishioners. To deal with all of the problems, workers erected scaffolding to hold up a massive metal plate



Repair work continues in the sanctuary at St. Augustine Catholic Church on July 9.

against the ceiling to keep it from falling in. Tarps were laid over the historic pews to protect them.

Two years later, St. Augustine remains shuttered, and while there's been progress, it still has far to go before repairs are finished.

Earlier this month, the church

announced repairs on its roof were complete. Work inside the sanctuary is now expected to follow. While Mulenga said the date for St. Augustine reopening is like "a moving goal post," he hopes the church will be ready in the fall.

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## Nelson says he has 10M ideas, but not \$10M, for governor bid

**'My goal is really to change the state.**

**Governor is the means to do that'**

BY TYLER BRIDGES

Staff writer

Richard Nelson is talking fast. Like always.

A 37-year-old first term state House member from Mandeville, he's the proverbial young man in a hurry as he mounts a long shot campaign for governor.

His words tumble out as he promotes the most ambitious changes sought by any of the seven candidates running to replace Gov. John Bel Edwards.

A Republican, Nelson is telling voters at every stop that he wants to phase out the state income tax and bury the power dynamic created by Huey Long almost 100 years ago that centralizes power in Baton Rouge. He also boasts of having worked with colleagues this spring to pass his bill aimed at boosting third graders' literacy, modeled after a successful measure adopted in Mississippi.

Nelson generally votes with

**ELECTION 2023**  
GOVERNOR

*Editor's note: This is the first of seven profiles of the major candidates for governor.*

Republicans, but he breaks with conservatives by advocating the legalization of marijuana, supporting exceptions for rape and incest for abortions and opposing the anti-LGBTQ+ measures that would ban certain books from libraries and prohibit discussion of sexuality and gender in classrooms.

"They don't solve any problems," he says of the latter two measures. "I denounce the culture wars and say they are unproductive."

Nelson said this as he was riding in his 2015 Silverado pickup while making several stops in St. Bernard Parish on Wednesday.

He talked to only a handful of voters that day — 18, to be exact — but remained upbeat throughout, even as he acknowledged that few people believe he should begin planning a move to the Governor's Mansion.

Obviously, this is a David and

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State Rep. Richard Nelson



## NELSON

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Goliath situation," Nelson said. "Most times, Goliath wins."

### 'Making this up as we go'

Nelson is betting that he can be David by attracting voters in the political center who think Louisiana is off track and don't want the Donald Trump-brand of conservatism embodied in Attorney General Jeff Landry, the front-runner.

Nelson would be strongly favored to win if he can make the runoff. That, of course, is a big if, given that polls put him in last place with about 2% of the vote.

With less money than his competitors and only a single paid staffer — a conservative political operative named James Lee — Nelson is accepting every speaking engagement and interview request and is using guerrilla-style campaign techniques to get out the word.

On Wednesday, with Lee at the wheel, Nelson drove through St. Bernard as they sought a place to record a 30-second video on the state's insurance woes that he would post on Facebook and Instagram.

"We're just making this up as we go along," Nelson said.

Lee spotted a scenic spot just off Paris Road. He positioned Nelson to stand before a bayou and fishing boats.

"Hi. It's state Rep. Richard Nelson, here in St. Bernard Parish, on the front lines of Louisiana's insurance crisis,"

Nelson said, as Lee recorded him with a phone. "People are being driven from their homes because they can't afford their premiums. Other candidates in this race are ignoring the problem."

Nelson flubbed his next words.

He and Lee tried again. It took 15 takes to get it right.

"Twenty years ago, you had to shake 10,000 hands," Nelson said after climbing back into his truck. "But with social media, you can touch 10,000 people with every video."

Earlier in the day, Nelson had touted a campaign appearance with "a local celebrity." It turned out to be Neuty, the nutria rescued by Jefferson Parish residents Denny and Myra Lacoste after Denny found the injured swamp rat on West Esplanade Avenue in Metairie in 2020.

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries officials wanted to seize Neuty in March after reading news stories about the Lacoste's unusual pet. But state Sen. Cameron Henry, R-Metairie, and Nelson intervened.

Neuty, now famous, spends his days at Dennis' Seafood, which the Lacoste's own.

Myra is James Lee's aunt.

Neuty, caged in a back storage room, padded out earlier Wednesday to greet the visitors. A couple of minutes later, Neuty pooped onto the concrete floor. Lee walked carefully over to the critter, picked him up and handed him to Nelson. Out came the phone to record another video.

"Like me, Neuty is not a fan of big government," Nelson



STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE

State Rep. Richard Nelson, R-Metairie, right, a Louisiana gubernatorial candidate, takes a picture of his son, Arthur, 7, left, with Neuty, a nutria, outside Dennis' Seafood in Metairie on Friday.

## RICHARD NELSON

**Party:** Republican

**Age:** 37

**Born:** McAllen, Texas. Lives in Mandeville

**Education:** Graduated from Mandeville High School; bachelor's of science in biological and agricultural engineering from LSU; juris doctorate from LSU Law School

**Career:** Works as a business consultant helping manage major projects; spent seven years as a U.S. State Department diplomat; Louisiana state representative since 2020

**More info:** [www.nelsonforla.com](http://www.nelsonforla.com)

said as Neuty looked up at him.

### Signature issues

A day earlier, Nelson explained his signature issue during a campaign forum organized by the Louisiana Sheriffs Association.

He would eliminate the state's individual income tax over four years and lower its corporate income tax. He would replace the revenue by lowering the state's \$75,000 homestead exemp-

tion to \$25,000 and by allowing local governments to begin imposing property taxes on certain nonprofit institutions and businesses that pay no property taxes now.

His plan also calls for lowering local sales taxes on groceries to lessen the tax bite on the poor and eliminating the inventory tax and the Industrial Tax Exemption Program, which reduces business taxes to lure investment in Louisiana.

Along with the other six

gubernatorial candidates, Nelson supports the changes by Edwards that have scaled back the tax breaks. But he alone would go much further by ditching the program.

Nelson delights in a 2021 newspaper headline that said his overall tax plan contains something that everybody hates. To him, that means it would produce the deep-seated changes needed by Louisiana to undo the political system wrought by Huey Long.

Nelson said his goal is to make Louisiana more competitive with Texas and Florida, which have no state income tax and, he said, have grown six times as fast as Louisiana since 2010.

His other signature issue is the measure approved by the Legislature this spring that will hold back third graders unless they pass the state reading exam. Children who fail the first test will receive extra tutoring and have two more chances under his legislation.

"Right now, if you can't read, we keep sending you up until you drop out of high school and commit crimes," Nelson told the sheriffs. "You guys know all about it. I hate looking to Mississippi for inspiration, but it's something that works, and we've brought it here now."

If he's elected governor, Nelson promises, he will end the dismal situation where, compared with the average of all 50 states, people in Louisiana live four years less and earn 33% less.

Nelson comes from a non-political family. In fact, he likes to joke that because his

father was an IRS agent, "he had less than zero friends."

Nelson was an Eagle Scout and had so many extra high school credits that he graduated from LSU in three years with a degree in biological engineering. After graduating from LSU's law school, he joined the State Department. Over seven years, he had posts in Washington, D.C., Germany and the country of Georgia. With a focus on security issues, he made repeated trips to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The seat behind the driver is the safest place in a car," Nelson told a visitor who got into the back seat of his truck. "Unless you're in Afghanistan. Then you want to sit in the front because then they won't think you're important. Important people sit in the back."

Probably the best model for Nelson in this year's race is the 1987 campaign waged by then-U.S. Rep. Buddy Roemer, who zoomed from last to first in the final weeks by promising a revolution.

Others, hearing Nelson's rapid-fire speech, liken him to Bobby Jindal, a Republican who left office in 2016 with his reputation in tatters after mounting a failed presidential campaign and leaving behind a legacy of huge budget deficits.

Nelson dismisses the comparison.

"I would say Bobby Jindal knew what he wanted to be," Nelson said. "I know what I want to do. That's the difference. He just wanted to be governor. My goal is really to change the state. Governor is the means to do that."

## CHURCH

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The repair process has taken longer than parishioners and Treme residents expected, and some aren't sure that the fall timeline is feasible.

"I'm not too sure about us going back in the fall," said Steven Gilyot, who has attended the church for over a decade. "We're just hoping to get back on our feet and have service in [the sanctuary]."

### Repairing it right

According to Mulenga and officials from the Archdiocese of New Orleans, a key reason for the delay in reopening the church is its history. St. Augustine, which is considered a historic landmark as the nation's oldest Black Roman Catholic parish, must adhere to the guidelines of the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission.

Repairs must be made with the church's existing specialized materials, which the church has had difficulty acquiring. Sourcing roof tiles, plaster, wood, copper and other materials has been held up by global supply chain issues, according to Sarah McDonald, a spokesperson for the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

"The composition of such a historic building as St. Augustine creates challenges," McDonald said. "This means more time but also provides for a complete restoration that preserves the historic and cultural significance of the building rather than simply repairing damage."

The HDLC, which has jurisdiction over the exterior of historic structures, requires that plans for repairs are submitted for approval. St. Augustine was allowed to move forward in October.

On top of that, workers have been restricted from accessing the steeple from Henriette Delille Street because of its proximity to overhead power lines. Access to the roof is limited to the church's side yard, slowing the repair process.

"This is a 182-year-old building. What you find when you open one layer is never predictable," Mulenga said.

Decreased donations following the pandemic have also thrown a wrench in St. Augustine's repairs.

Before the storm damage and pandemic, St. Augustine started a capital campaign to restore the church. A steady flow of donations from out-of-town visitors combined with



STAFF PHOTOS BY SCOTT THRELKELD

Mass is celebrated in the parish hall at St. Augustine Catholic Church on July 9.



Repair work continues in the sanctuary at St. Augustine Catholic Church on July 9.

parishioners' contributions jump-started the \$2.5 million capital campaign.

According to St. Augustine's website, \$1.5 million has been raised so far.

The storm damage piled more costs onto the church's efforts, though it's not clear what the total bill for all repairs will come to.

### Changing neighborhood

Gilyot and others said changes in Treme could be making it harder for St. Augustine to raise all of the money.

The neighborhood has seen an increase of senior citizens and short term rentals that has stifled the parish's growth, according to Gia M. Hamilton, executive director and chief curator of the New Orleans African American Museum, which is two blocks from St. Augustine.

According to Mulenga, St. Augustine has received "tremendous support" from the archdiocese in its current repair process, such as providing St. Augustine assistance in reviewing insurance paperwork and dealing with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The archdiocese would not disclose how much money it has given St. Augustine for its Ida repairs. According to McDonald, it continues to look for addi-

tional funding for St. Augustine through grants and historic tax credits.

St. Augustine is just one of the many parishes, schools and properties throughout the archdiocese to still await Ida damage repairs.

"It is estimated that the cost to make all Hurricane Ida repairs will exceed \$100 million, which exceeds insurance coverage,"

McDonald said. "That coupled with the rate of storm damage deductibles, has created significant challenges and frustration for parishioners, pastors and for archdiocesan officials."

Until the sanctuary is repaired, parishioners and out-of-town visitors gather for mass in the parish hall, where a temporary sanctuary is set up. St. Augustine

has turned to livestreams of mass to connect housebound parishioners. The livestreams also allow visitors from across the globe to view mass, which recently led to a small rebound in donations.

"My hope is that work can be done as soon as possible, but no rushing. We have to do quality work," Mulenga said.

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