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Monday, June 12, 2006

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Alberto is the first named tropical storm of the 2006 hurricane season, which began June 1. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees the hurricane center, has predicted this season will be an active one: 13 to 16 named storms, with eight to 10 becoming hurricanes, of which four to six could become major hurricanes of Category 3 strength or higher (with winds of 111 mph or more).

No one needs to tell Louisianans that 2005 was the most active hurricane season recorded in 154 years, thanks to the twin-battering of Katrina and Rita. The season saw a record 28 storms, including 15 hurricanes. Seven were considered major, of which a record four hit the United States.

The hurricane center, for the first time, used all 21 planned names and then, for the first time, dipped into the Greek alphabet to begin naming storms.

Meteorologists have said the Atlantic is not as warm now as it was at this time in 2005. Warm water is what fuels tropical storms.

Last year's first named storm of the season was Tropical Storm Arlene, which formed June 9. It made landfall just west of Pensacola in the Florida Panhandle.

During the 2004 season, the first named storm, Hurricane Alex, formed as a depression July 31. In 2003, Tropical Storm Ana formed in April, before the official start of the hurricane season.

Five years ago, in early June 2001, Tropical Storm Allison lingered off the coasts of Louisiana and Texas, dumping record rainfall totals in many communities.

<http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/3017926.html?showAll=y>

Session enters hectic finale

Lawmakers have one week to finalize major legislation.

Mike Hasten; mhasten@gannett.com

BATON ROUGE - As the Legislature moves into its final, sure-to-be-hectic week, state lawmakers again have put off some of the most critical issues for the waning hours.

Dealing with key bills is nothing new. It's a function of timing and, most of all, a function of money.

Still to be settled before the session ends at 6 p.m. June 19 are:

The \$21.7 billion budget, known as the Appropriations Bill

The \$4 billion state construction program, known as Capital Outlay

\$2.7 billion in education funding, known as the Minimum Foundation Program

To get the latest picture of state income, the Revenue Estimating Conference put off its meeting until May 15 and, sure enough, there were millions of dollars more than anticipated a few months before that meeting.

Soon after that meeting, the House Appropriations Committee attached a series of amendments to the proposed budget, spending the new money. The House Ways and Means Committee also added amendments to the Capital Outlay Bill.

In less than two weeks, both bills were sent to senators for their input.

Now, all House members can do is wait until the Senate finishes massaging the two money bills.

A Senate committee Sunday tacked on more proposed plans to build or renovate roads, college campus buildings and local projects like museums and livestock arenas.

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"It's our hope, although somewhat optimistic, that we'll get it back and approve it without going to conference," said House Speaker Joe Salter, D-Florien. "We have some reason to think that the Senate won't do much to it. I'm sure there will be some amendments."

Rep. Bryant Hammett, D-Ferriday, the author of House Bill 2, the construction budget bill, said he doesn't have the insight that Salter does, so "I don't know what the Senate has planned for HB2. It's too early in the process."

Hammett said there "was some talk about sending it to conference," where a group of three representatives and three senators would decide which projects the House and Senate should decide upon. "But, we'll have to see what the Senate does."

Salter said the amendments to HB2 aren't as crucial as those to HB1 - the state's operating budget - because "HB2 doesn't have to be balanced."

With a priority list and a set amount to spend, a large number of projects in HB2 won't be funded.

Among the items added Sunday by the Senate Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Committee were dollars for ball park improvements in Iberia Parish, health unit construction in Madison Parish, a parking garage in Vermilion Parish, local roads and community centers.

The bill goes next to another Senate committee before advancing to the full Senate for debate.

Fulfilling its constitutional obligation, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education submitted a proposed funding plan that many board members expected to be rejected because it sought to spend more money than the Blanco administration said was available.

The House Education Committee spent weeks going over the plan before telling BESE to rewrite it, which was completed June 1. The committee will review the revised plan Tuesday and send it to the House this week. The legislature only can approve or reject the plan; under the law they are not allowed to make any changes within it - that's BESE's responsibility.

Senators still have to review and approve the proposal before the session ends, Otherwise, the current MFP, which BESE officials say is inadequate for parishes rebounding from the hurricanes because it was sliced in November, will stay in effect.

As for non-budgetary matters, there are still some key issues on the table heading into the final week.

Jimmy Clarke, chief of staff for Gov. Kathleen Blanco, said the governor is pleased with the success of her legislative package, but there are still some items unsettled that she is watching.

"She is still intimately involved in the passage of (New Orleans) governmental reorganization," Clarke said.

Bills consolidating separate criminal and civil court systems, including clerks' offices, and reducing the number of assessors from four to one are to be settled this week.

The governor also is watching bills by Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, and Sen. Charles Barham, R-Oak Grove, that deal with operations of the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

The bills put into law executive orders that the governor issued during hurricanes Katrina and Rita, including waiving a requirement that out-of-state first responders - emergency medical crews, doctors and nurses - must be licensed to provide care in Louisiana.

"This allows certain things to go into place" when an emergency is declared, Clarke said. "In upcoming events, the governor doesn't have to go through the process of issuing the orders. It will expedite the process.

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Committee stuffs plenty of pork into construction spending bill

Times – Picayune; 06.12.06

Money for City Park among the requests

By Jan Moller; Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- A Senate committee stuffed more than \$500 million worth of projects into the annual state construction bill late Sunday, moving it forward with far more spending requests than there is money in the budget to pay for them.

With no debate, the Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Committee added 67 pages worth of amendments requested by legislators, mostly for projects in their districts, bringing the total amount of the bill to \$4.7 billion.

About \$2 billion in the bill is cash from the federal government and fees that the state collects from drivers, and most of that is directed to road projects. The remaining \$2.7 billion consists of general obligation bonds.

Much of the bond money is obligated to projects that are already under way, which leaves the state \$231 million in the upcoming budget year for new projects. But there is already \$372 million worth of spending requests vying for financing.

"We have a lot of projects to choose from," state facilities director Jerry Jones said.

House Bill 2 by Rep. Bryant Hammett, D-Ferriday, now heads to the Senate Finance Committee, which must approve the cash portion of the bill. After that it goes to the Senate floor for debate.

The State Bond Commission, dominated by allies of Gov. Kathleen Blanco, makes the final decision on which new projects get financed.

As a practical matter, many of the spending requests added to the budget bill stand little or no chance of getting cash or state-issued lines of credit in the budget year that begins July 1.

Lawmakers and administration officials have spoken for years about wanting to be more disciplined in how they craft the bill, rather than letting it become a de-facto wish list of regional pet projects. But those discussions have had little impact, and this year's bill is similar to previous years when legislators try to spend far more money than the state has available.

"This is typical. This is the process we have," Jones said. "We're overloaded every year."

A bill by Sen. Robert Adley, D-Benton, that was approved by the committee last month, would have streamlined the process. But Senate Bill 474 has yet to come up for a vote on the floor, and Adley said it is likely dead for the current session. He said he would try to pass similar legislation next year.

Many of the spending requests added on Sunday are for projects that were included in previous years but never received any money. For example, Sen. Edwin Murray, D-New Orleans, restored about \$3 million he requested last year for Delgado Community College for a math and science school and a nursing and allied health facility.

New projects added by the Senate include \$2.6 million for New Orleans City Park, \$600,000 to develop an "ecotourism master plan" for the Highway 190 in St. Tammany Parish, and \$15.2 million for a New Orleans East Sports Center at Joe Brown Park.

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<http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/capital/index.ssf?/base/news-3/1150090935153730.xml>

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La.'s budget includes billions for hurricane recovery

The Associated Press; 06.11.06

By MELINDA DESLATTE

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — More than a quarter of Louisiana's budget next year will feed directly into the state's efforts to recover from hurricanes Katrina and Rita — mainly federal dollars slated for housing assistance, health care and school reconstruction. The money has boosted the state's budget to record levels.

An estimated \$8 billion of the \$26.5 billion budget planned for the new year that begins in only weeks is related to the disaster relief efforts.

The state also is setting aside nearly \$600 million of its own tax income windfall in the current year for recovery needs and preparations for the next hurricane or tropical storm.

Amid worries from central and north Louisiana lawmakers that the state's dollars would fund hurricane relief to the detriment of the rest of the state, Gov. Kathleen Blanco's administration has tried to showcase a balance between recovery and other initiatives.

"Clearly the budget has a focus on recovery, but it is also important that we continue to move the general agenda of the state forward," said Blanco's chief budget adviser, Commissioner of Administration Jerry Luke LeBlanc.

However, there are a few concerns among lawmakers about unmet recovery needs as they debate spending plans in the current legislative session. And some worry the dollars could get caught in a quagmire of bureaucracy and not reach the neediest of residents.

The two largest pieces of federal relief aid included in next year's budget — for the fiscal year that begins July 1 — include \$4.5 billion for an aid program for homeowners and small apartment owners with hurricane damage, and \$2 billion in pass-throughs in the state's homeland security department from FEMA to reimburse government agencies for recovery spending, like debris removal and building repairs.

Other significant hurricane-related spending includes:

_\$400 million in federal and state dollars to help local governments that are financially struggling after the hurricanes,

_\$346 million in federal dollars to restart school operations damaged by the hurricanes,

_\$241 million in federal health care aid for Louisiana's Medicaid program for the poor, elderly and disabled.

_From the state's excess cash for this year, \$434 million is set aside to pay FEMA for Louisiana's share of the hurricane response efforts to Katrina and Rita, and another \$150 million is earmarked for an emergency response fund pushed by Blanco to cover the state's costs of evacuations, sheltering and transportation this hurricane season.

Agencies say they also are spending additional dollars on hurricane recovery that can't be broken out on a spreadsheet.

Though she was pleased with most of the recovery initiatives in the budget plans, Rep. Cheryl Gray, a member of the House's budget-writing committee, said she was concerned the state wasn't providing enough dollars for psychiatric hospital beds in the New Orleans area. There, people have higher incidents of mental health problems since Katrina.

She also said she worried that agencies needed to beef up their outreach efforts to announce the relief services available with the influx of dollars.

"Having more money is one thing, and it's significant, but it's got to get out to the people," said Gray, D-New Orleans.

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Rep. Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, said the state wasn't properly addressing its insurance needs. He said the dollars set aside in the emergency preparedness fund could be better used helping shore up the state-run insurer of last resort, the Louisiana Citizens Property Insurance Corp.

The insurance company, which offers homeowners insurance to those who can't get it on the open market, is assessing private insurance companies a regular fee that they can pass onto all their Louisiana customers to pay off Citizens' borrowing to cover claims after the hurricanes.

Tucker, head of the House's Republican caucus, said the state's income projections are expected to improve in the upcoming year, giving the state more dollars to spend that could cover expenses for hurricanes this year and making an emergency preparedness fund unnecessary.

"It's the governor's slush fund. As I appreciate it, she has complete control over the money, and by simply declaring an emergency, she can spend it at will," he said.

LeBlanc said the state needs to prepare for as many as seven evacuations this hurricane season because levee repairs are unfinished and thousands of people are living in FEMA trailers, making them more vulnerable to tropical storms that normally wouldn't prompt evacuations. FEMA won't reimburse the state for evacuations when storms don't hit the state.

"We've got \$150 million parked for hurricane purposes, and that's a good thing," said Barry Erwin, head of the nonpartisan Council for A Better Louisiana.

Erwin said he could think of few gaps in hurricane recovery funding in the planned state budget, a sentiment that many lawmakers echoed.

But there have been some questions about a few types of planned response spending.

Blanco, who has a heavy hand in the crafting of the budget even as it moves through the Legislature, is seeking to create 89 new jobs in her offices for homeland security and hurricane recovery, many of those posts paid with federal relief aid.

Several lawmakers have questioned the salaries of the posts and the number.

"I just don't know what this bureaucracy is going to do to make us better prepared," Rep. Joe Toomy, R-Gretna, during a hearing on a bill to increase positions in the state's homeland security office.

The budget bill for next year is filed as House Bill 1 and can be found at <http://www.legis.state.la.us>
<http://www.nola.com/newsflash/louisiana/index.ssf?/base/news-25/1150062553109520.xml&storylist=louisiana>

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A look at La.'s planned hurricane recovery spending **The Associated Press; 06.11.06**

(AP) — Louisiana's budget for the upcoming fiscal year totals about \$26.5 billion, though it still is being crafted by lawmakers. Included in the 2006-07 spending plan is about \$8 billion for hurricane recovery. The biggest ticket items include:

- _ \$4.5 billion in federal aid for a housing aid program for homeowners with major hurricane damage and for small apartment owners.
- _ \$2 billion that passes through the state's homeland security department from FEMA to reimburse mainly local government agencies for disaster relief efforts.
- _ \$400 million in state and federal cash to help local governments with their debt payments so they don't default after the hurricanes destroyed local tax revenues.
- _ \$346 million in federal aid to restart school operations damaged by the hurricanes.
- _ \$241 million in federal health care aid for Louisiana's Medicaid program for the poor, elderly and disabled.
- _ \$95 million in federal block grant aid for local infrastructure repairs.
- _ \$95 million in federal block grant aid for loans to businesses damaged by the hurricanes.
- _ \$88 million in federal social services grants to help with mental health care and preventive and primary health care services.
- _ \$50 million in federal block grant aid for state building repairs.
- _ \$11 million in federal and state dollars for new positions and startup costs for hurricane recovery and emergency response staff in Gov. Kathleen Blanco's offices.

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In the current fiscal year, an unexpected boost in tax income will be partially set aside for recovery efforts:

- _ \$434 million to pay FEMA for Louisiana's share of the hurricane response efforts to Katrina and Rita.
- _ \$150 million for an emergency response fund to cover state costs of evacuations, sheltering and transportation this hurricane season.

<http://www.nola.com/newsflash/louisiana/index.ssf?/base/news-25/1150062555109520.xml&storylist=louisiana>

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Senate committee approves \$26 billion budget bill

The Associated Press; 06.09.06

By MELINDA DESLATTE

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A more than \$26.5 billion budget — increased to record levels by federal hurricane recovery aid — was approved Friday by a Senate committee that made adjustments mainly to relief dollars and state health care spending.

The bill that directs spending for the new year that begins July 1 includes education pay raises, beefed-up funding for public colleges, new dollars for nursing homes, hospitals and other health care providers and cash for lawmakers' individual add-ons for their districts.

After hours of delays while the changes were worked out behind the scenes, the Senate Finance Committee agreed unanimously to 77 pages of amendments to the budget plan and shipped it to the full Senate for debate.

Sen. Francis Heitmeier, who as chairman of the committee shepherds the bill through the Senate, said he expected it to be taken up on the Senate floor early next week.

Heitmeier, D-New Orleans, acknowledged the budget bill sent over by the House had fewer shortfalls and problems than may have been typical of previous years.

"The bill arrived in pretty good shape when it got here," he said.

Among the most significant change by the Senate committee was the addition of nearly \$4.8 billion in federal block grant aid the state will receive in the upcoming year for housing repair grants and building repairs. The committee also shifted new dollars to help rebuild charity hospital care in New Orleans and repair the medical training programs at LSU.

And on top of the \$17 million in local pet projects added by the House, senators tacked on at least \$15 million more for town fire stations, local museums, senior centers, a balloon festival and other items back home.

Lawmakers approved a notably smaller budget last year, totaling \$18.7 billion, but it was plumped up throughout the current fiscal year with federal recovery aid and other new dollars after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The budget bill for the upcoming 2006-07 year includes about \$7.4 billion in federal relief aid. Gov. Kathleen Blanco's administration has tried to deflect criticism of giant leaps in state spending, saying most of the new dollars are tied to one-time hurricane recovery efforts.

The state's financial picture also improved substantially as general income was bolstered by oil and gas revenue and the taxes generated as recovery workers gamble around the state and residents buy replacement cars, furniture and other household goods destroyed by the hurricanes.

Before agreeing to the spending plan, the Senate committee moved dollars to the state's tourism department — dollars to avoid cuts to state commemorative sights and the state library office. They also approved new spending for City Park in New Orleans to keep it operating after the hurricane damaged it and its revenue sources.

Senators shifted more dollars for community- and home-based services for the disabled, for the creation of a statewide trauma network and for pediatric dental services. They plugged \$5 million in state cash for trauma care at New Orleans' charity hospital and another \$15 million for the LSU health care training programs.

Many of the dollars came from minor adjustments to other areas and from the removal of about \$19 million from an emergency response fund to cover the costs of evacuations and sheltering in the current hurricane season. But the committee left \$150 million in the emergency fund as Blanco requested.

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Under the budget bill approved by the committee, hundreds of state jobs across state departments and agencies would be eliminated while new jobs would be created in Blanco's offices for post-storm recovery efforts.

Pay raises would be given to public school teachers, school support workers like janitors and cafeteria workers, assistant district attorneys, judges, college professors and others. Teachers would get \$1,500 pay hikes, and support workers an extra \$500 a year.

Education dollars would be increased throughout the public college system. Health care spending also would grow.

The budget bill for next year is filed as House Bill 1. It can be found at <http://www.legis.state.la.us>
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