1982 Was Year Filled With Battles Over Booze, Taxes, Jail Space

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It will be some time before it is determined whether local officials and concerned citizens have succeeded in their year-long fight to rid this area of drunk drivers.

Californian Candy Lightner, founder of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, got the 11-month push started here in January and the movement has picked up steam throughout the year.

Special panels, chambers of concerned Citizens Against Drunk Drivers and MADD were formed (later to merge into CMADD) of bartenders, groups of bartenders (called BADD) gathered to find ways to combat drunk driving.

But when it came to doing something to solve the problem, the unity splintered. A major aim of the movement was to close bars at 2 a.m., so people wouldn't sit at bars until the wee hours of the morning and then try to drive home. Studies show that a majority of the fatal wrecks involving drunk drivers occur early in the morning.

Bartenders rebelled. They claim that closing at 2 a.m. threatens the survival of their businesses. Closing Lafayette's bars would force their customers to go to other areas where bars stay open longer, they said.

But the fight didn't stop there. Surrounding towns and parishes also began passing similar laws. The Lafayette Parish Police Jury followed the city's move and starting New Year's day, bars shut down at 2 a.m.

New state laws that also went into effect were stiffer penalties for bar employees, which could lead to another problem - jail space.

Parish Jail

The Sheriff's Department, Police Jury and the city have been battling with the problem of jail space for several years but some aid finally came in 1982.

Bids for a new jail came in much higher than expected but a plan was to be approved to build part of the structure and add more space as funds become available.

In the meantime, a minimum security jail was set up in the old City Hall building largely through the efforts of volunteers who cleaned, painted, replumbed and did other work at no charge. The new facility, coupled with renovations in the parish jail that allowed more prisoners to be housed, eased the problem somewhat.

Moving minimum security prisoners out of the parish jail created another problem, however. Less dangerous criminals had been allowed to work in the kitchen and laundry of the parish jail but because they were no longer housed there, more serious offenders were assigned those duties.

On Nov. 21, three inmates who were on work detail escaped from the jail by climbing down the seven-story-tall jail on a rope made of braided sheets. They were later recaptured but not before two women were attacked.

The escape brought reform in the operations of the jail, including the transfer of certain low-risk prisoners to work in the jail kitchen. More security devices are to be installed.

Solving the jail problem relates to a problem faced by almost every political body in Lafayette - Taxes

When the city-parish sales tax proposal was rejected by voters, it signalled to local citizens that they were backing the tax. Local residents, for the first time feeling the burden of taxes has been affecting the state's pocketbook, told government that they weren't going to pay any more.

Some of the projects to be funded were needed, voters said, but the cost was too high and there was no guarantee that the money would be used on the most needed projects.

It didn't take long before the city's projections of harder times came true.

Requests for additional money for projects and additional personnel were rejected.

At the School Board, ratings were granted early in the year and several months later. Results showed that some schools were trimmed, some work was held back and staff members started looking at their chances of getting laid off. Teachers were told to miss too much school because substitute teachers would not be hired.

Government bodies were given the opportunity to increase their income by raising property taxes but most opposed the idea.

Taxes were not the only area of concern. Lafayette is facing property tax assessments but that stirred a great public outcry and the millage rates were readjusted so most people will not be paying a great deal more taxes than they have in past years.

But because of increased property values and newly developed property, local governments will be getting some increase in funds.

New Government

After one of the most debated battles in Lafayette history, the new city-parish council was sworn in on January 1.

They went to the polls to decide the fate of a new parish government. The charter, which will meet in 14-member form, is the third in the state to pass.

The council's job is to oversee the Chamber of Commerce and regulate the city and parish. Among other things, the council will take over the city's coffers.

(Continued from Page 2, Col. 1)