$40 million added to capital outlay bill

By MARSHA SHULER
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In an effort to enhance Martin Marietta's chances of getting a space station contract, a House panel Monday endorsed state funding of a $40 million training facility — adding the project to the state's capital construction program.

The Ways and Means Committee approved the bond financing for the project as it considered Edwards administration-sponsored changes to the construction program.

"It's part of Louisiana's effort to help Martin Marietta acquire this industry for our state," explained Rep. Claude "Buddy" Leach, D-Leesville, committee chairman.

If Martin Marietta is not successful in obtaining the federal contract for the space station, Leach said the money would not be used. He said it will be December before officials know whether the Orleans-based facility will get the contract.

Approved by the committee is $5 million in priority one, which means it can be tapped immediately, and $35 million in priority five, a category usually reserved for projects that are only in the thinking stage.

Leach said the funds would be under the control of the Louisiana Aerospace and Aviation Development Authority.

Meanwhile, the Senate voted 35-0 approving and sending to the House a bill by Sen. Jon Johnson, D-New Orleans, to establish a nine-member board of commissioners to administer the money.

The panel would have broad powers, purchase of technical equipment for the training center specified in the contract would be exempt from the state's procurement code.

As it entered committee, the capital construction program (HB720 by Rep. Raymond Laborde, D-Marksville) contained $486.5 million in state and federal cash — mostly for highways —
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and a potential for $711 million in borrowing.

The Martin Marietta addition was the only major change approved by the committee.

Otherwise, lawmakers gave the go-ahead to administration-sponsored changes that mainly shift money from one priority to another.

Projects totaling about $8 million were moved up to priority one — giving them the first call on bond money raised during the fiscal year, which begins July 1.

Included is $4.7 million for asbestos abatement and renovation of the old Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Building in New Orleans for the Supreme Court, 4th Circuit Court of Appeal and the state Justice Department. Another $12.2 million for the project is in a lower priority.

In addition, the committee decided to increase next year’s funding for the Mississippi River dredging and deepening project from $1.5 million to $3.4 million — moving the additional funds out of a lower priority.

The committee postponed deliberations on the highway construction program and projects on Southern University campuses. Legislators said they need more information.

Rep. Chris Ullo, D-Marrero, pointed to a highway project in his district that he said is finished, yet the construction bill includes $1 million for right of way, moving utilities and construction.

A Department of Transportation and Development employee said the project experienced a $1 million cost overrun. He explained the $1 million is to repay the treasury for money already spent.

“How much more money falls into that category?” asked Ullo.

The DOTD employee did not have the information and lawmakers decided to wait to get it.

Black committee members wanted to know why projects on Southern University campuses continued in a lower priority even though most are required under a consent decree to desegregate colleges.

No Southern University representatives were present so consideration of the projects was postponed.