$50,000 grant to bolster DWI program

By MIKE DUNNE
Advocate staff writer

The National Highway Safety Administration has named Baton Rouge of one 10 cities nationwide for a alcohol deterrence program.

The NHTSA named the city a "Target of Opportunity City" for a comprehensive general drinking driver deterrence program, making $50,000 available for monitoring the city's program.

"As a Target of Opportunity Program, we hope to present a successful nationwide model which other local communities can emulate. This also gives us the opportunity to compile and present the statistics from a successful local program to the U.S. Congress and to state and local officials throughout Louisiana," Screen said.

Baton Rouge was selected because of the current campaign against drinking and the success of "Operation Checkmate."

Checkmate has been a comprehensive program including enforcement, prosecution, adjudication, presentation investigation and probation/ rehabilitation of DWI offenders.

Checkmate began as a federally funded enforcement program. The federal grant ran out and local funds have been used to continue the program four days a week.

The grant and the resulting monitoring information should put the city in a good position should federal funds for DWI enforcement programs become available again, the mayor said.

"When they start handing out grants, the city that has earned its spurs" has the best chance, he said.

The city-parish has already been granted $200,000 by the state for a DWI center, which Screen decided against when local law enforcement and judicial officials failed to endorse the plan.

He is now asking the state, which made the money available to local governments to help them deal with a tough new state driving while intoxicated law, to use the money to operate a DWI enforcement program seven days a week.

The funds would also buy additional equipment for the program.

Screen said he has not gotten word from the governor's office on the grant but hopes to get a decision soon.

Because of a lack of funds, Operation Checkmate now operates only on weekend nights when DWI activity is believed to be at its peak.

Screen recently was named to a NHTSA-sponsored panel of the U.S. Conference of Mayors concerning local community efforts to combat the drinking driver.

Screen sat on the panel during the conference's June meeting in Denver, Co.

He said discussions about the grant began at that conference.