Acadia seeks '86 budget cuts

By JO CART
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Crowley — After a marathon six-hour session, Acadia Parish police jurors turned to a 2 1/2 percent cut for many parish departments, including their own salaries, to balance the 1986 budget.

They started at 10 a.m. Tuesday for a regular two-hour jury meeting, then adjourned later for a lunch hour. All the jurors resumed the meeting as the Finance Committee at 1 p.m. and worked until 9 a.m.

The jurors were visibly frustrated as they struggled to eliminate more than $500,000 from their original proposal in order to balance the 1986 budget, as state law mandates.

Expenditures required by the state and courts came up repeatedly.

The largest such expenditure is for operating the district courts. Rather than the $196,667 they had originally budgeted, jurors had to come up with $316,000 as their share of district-court operations.

Jurors openly rejected the court order.

"We recently approved a $10 increase in court costs to help relieve the situation, and the judges just turned around and used it to give a 1 percent raise to all of their staff members, while we are forced to lay off people across the parish," Juror Stan Rogers said.

"We might as well get out of the yellow pages," Juror Homer Clemons said. "I don't know of any other jurisdiction that is in better shape than we are."

Rogers suggested raising court fees again, but other jurors said the costs already were higher in Acadia than in most other parishes.

Rogers then suggested asking the sheriff to have deputies issue tickets to traffic violators since there is only one state trooper assigned to Acadia Parish.

Chief Deputy Clerk Roy Lyons said the budget is part of the public record and that the state auditor was auditing the office's books Tuesday.

"We have nothing to hide," Lyons said. "I'm sure that, if you make a request, the auditor will be happy to provide you with whatever you want."

The budget had been the subject of the hearing, and a budget request from the clerk's office was for "injuries such as computer service." Byron said that the clerk's office was already working on a computer.

"Why don't we just negotiate and let someone else take over?" Juror D.J. Dupuis said in frustration.

"That would release $16,000 from the budget," Lyons said.

Rogers remitted the jury that a March 1985 federal ruling by Judge Frank Polosko requires the jury to supply their own parish payroll if jurors cut the budget in that department, they would face another suit, he said.

"Are there any inter-department funds that we could borrow to get us through this crisis?" Juror Homer Clemons asked jury secretary, Treasurer Joe Aradie.

"We only have some inter-fund loans, and I don't think it's the appropriate thing to do," Aradie said. "I don't think the situation is going to get any better," Aradie said. "We will just have to live with what we have."

Rogers said no other jurisdiction has suggested cutting back on spraying grasskillers.

"Why can't we just close down the parish road barn for three months, let the staff draw unemployment, and the jury draw no salary for that same time?" Juror Jean St. George said.

"The unemployment is what would be charged back to us anyway, and we would still have the same problem," Aradie said.

"When we first talked about the parish solid-waste tax, we said we would get by with a 1 percent cut, and then we decided to cut it for $16,000. It's a little more," Aradie said. "We didn't think that much, and now we have funds there, so why can't we go back to the people and ask them to let us spend that other 1/2 percent in the general fund?"

The jury did not discuss that idea, and returned to looking at road funds.

"I hate to say this, but we can cut our road crews back to just the foremen and key people," said Juror Gerald Frigo.

"Let's cut gravel and shell for one year," Finance Committee Chairman Leroy Broward said.

Jurors finally settled on cutting the road crews by six men and asking the foremen to fill the void. The jury already has laid off six parish employees in 1985.

The jury also eliminated the grass spraying for a year, at a savings of $12,000. Jurors agreed that, when grass becomes too tall for safety at rural intersections, crews will cut it by hand.

Gravel and shell supplies will be used only for pothole repairs.

Also, a new mower operator hired during the morning session was laid off, creating possibly the shortest record of employment by a parish worker.

Jurors almost cut funds to the Council on Aging, which provides one hot meal a day to the elderly in the parish. After strong objections from Juror Tyrone "Bull" Johnson, they refused to alter the aged.

They slashed funds for equipment parts, fuel allowances and professional fees, adding another $16,000, and cut all parish employees to a 32-hour week.

All departments in the parish, except those where employees are mandated by law, were cut by 2 1/2 percent on the 1986 budget to provide the rest of the needed funds, with bitter objections from department representatives.

Parish Registrar of Voters Emery Venard bluntly told the jurors he could not cut it on the 2 1/2 percent reduction because he is under orders to canvass the parish and would be sued if he did not comply.

"I have cut $8,000 since I took office, and I just can't cut any more," he said.

"We have no choice," Aradie said. "We don't like it, but we all have to accept the cut. Certainly don't want my department cut either, but we have no choice."