ascension faces $2.3 million loss

by tim tally
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Donaldsonville — The Ascension Parish Police Jury expects to lose more than $2.3 million in operating revenues next year and has little chance of making it up, Police Jury officials said Monday night.

Decreases in revenue from federal, state and local sources will cut deeply into the jury's ability to provide public services and will force them to cut spending to match the parish's income, jurors said.

A 5-mill parishwide tax election will appear on the general election ballot Nov. 4. However, the tax will raise no more than $800,000 a year and will not be enough to take care of the shortfall, Secretary-Treasurer Gwen LeBlanc said.

The Police Jury reviewed the dreary financial projections and adopted a resolution announcing jurors' intention to match their expenses with revenues. That process could result in the layoffs of an unspecified number of parish workers, according to jurors.

Parish officials have said that as many as 50 parish employees could be laid off in 1987.

Juror Thomas “Moose” Pearce, chairman of the finance committee, said jurors “... need to look at (the) number of personnel that the jury can support without regard to the people in the positions.”

The jury scheduled a special finance committee meeting for Nov. 17 to begin the process of reducing expenses. Pearce said jurors will identify the parish's priorities and decide what services the jury can afford to continue providing.

Pearce reported that the parish's income will drop by about $2,353,000 in 1987, including the loss of $650,000 in federal revenue sharing funds, $570,000 in state transportation funds and more than $800,000 from a projected 15 percent decline in parish sales and use tax collections.

The parish collects about $3.3 million in sales taxes annually but is experiencing an 8 percent decline in collections this year, Pearce said.

“We have never discussed how we would adjust for a reduction in sales tax collections,” he said.

The parish's revenues have not grown in proportion with the population and the resulting demand on public services, he said. Population has risen from about 37,000 in 1970 to nearly 59,000 last year.

Adding to the jury's financial dilemma is the fact that the parish faces millions of dollars in fixed costs that cannot be adjusted. Among them are $1.87 million for road and bridge maintenance, $2.34 for drainage and $1.5 million for a jail expansion project.

The problems have forced jurors to improve the jury's budgetary control and accounting procedures, Pearce said. The Police Jury has instituted a centralized purchasing system, a building maintenance program and computerized record keeping.

In a related matter, the jury authorized Sheriff Harold Tridico to pursue the possibility of locating a juvenile detention facility in an abandoned funeral home near a residential area in Donaldsonville.

Ascension has no facilities for juveniles in its 56-prisoner jail although sheriff's deputies have arrested 192 juveniles so far this year, Tridico said. Only 13 of the juveniles have been incarcerated at juvenile facilities in other jails, he said.

In other action, jurors:

* Set trick-or-treat hours from 5:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday night to avoid conflicting with a major high school football game Friday night in Gonzales.