Ascension Parish jurors consider drug-test policy

By TIM TALLEY
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GONZALES — The Ascension Parish Police Jury Thursday night agreed to begin formulating a drug-testing policy for parish workers.

Although jurors did not cite specific examples of drug abuse by Police Jury employees, the jurors said drug tests will lower the parish's exposure to costly accidents involving parish workers and will cut down on damage to equipment.

"I don't know what's going on, but we sure have a lot of equipment torn up," said Juror Marvin Braud.

The parish's financial status has never been worse, officials said. Drug testing will be expensive, but it will save tax dollars in the long run.

"The cost of the program is expensive. But the cost of the damage that this parish would be responsible for ... would be much, much more," said Juror Darnell Martinez.

Juror Carey Frederic, who suggested the new policy, said workers whose drug tests are positive should be required to seek treatment.

"I'd be glad to go first. I'm looking for the safety and betterment of Ascension Parish here," Frederic said. "I don't think it's intended to get anybody fired," Braud said.

Frederic predicted that the new policy will take many weeks to develop and that it will have to overcome some serious legal obstacles.

"I know something needs to be done," said Juror Joseph U. Pierre. "These kinds of things take the rights away from people."

Pierre said the tests may be used to prevent parish workers from getting a job somewhere else. But parish Administrator Moran Watson said workers' personnel records are confidential and not open to public scrutiny.

On another matter, jurors agreed to schedule a meeting with local physicians to discuss accusations that they are encouraging nursing homes and law enforcement authorities to use services at a private Gonzales hospital that is competing with a tax-supported facility.

James "Sno" Sheets, chairman of the board of directors of the East Ascension General Hospital, said Dr. John Fraiche, Ascension's coroner, and Dr. Richard A. Streb have circulated letters to area nursing homes promoting the Riverview Medical Center.

Sheets said the physicians want autopsies and police examinations conducted at the new for-profit facility operated by American Medical International, Inc., a California-based health care services company.

"This is what's going on constantly," Sheets said. He said ambulance drivers are also being harassed.

Braud said East Ascension, a 50-bed, non-profit hospital, is tax-supported and should be supported. Juror Elemen Babin said promotion of the new private hospital by parish officials should be opposed.

"The whole jury is going to talk to the doctors," said President Alan J. "Boxcar" Braud.

Watson said the jury pays for autopsies and can require physicians to perform them at East Ascension to cut costs.

In other action, jurors.

* Adopted a resolution asking the Cooper/T. Smith Stevedoring Co. Inc. to settle a two-week-old strike with the International Longshoreman's Association, Local 3033.

* Conducted public hearings to discuss proposed changes in five parish ordinances dealing with subdivisions, bingo games and other matters.

* Offered no objection to the construction of a 3.5 mile natural gas pipeline by Devon Energy Co. after demanding that the contractor on the project hire parish workers.