Ascension jury cuts budget by $400,000

By TIM TALLEY

The Ascension Parish Police Jury on Monday night slashed spending in its proposed 1987 budget by nearly $400,000, imposing 10 percent cuts on parish agencies and increasing parish workers' share of the cost of health and life insurance.

But the cuts are less than half of what the Police Jury needs to compensate for falling revenues and erase a projected $858,000 operating deficit in next year's general fund.

Jurors said they will be forced to reduce services again and will consider laying off part of the parish's workforce of more than 100 to balance the general fund budget. Jurors have said previously that as many as 50 workers may be laid off by the end of 1986.

Cost-cutting has become the jury's top priority since a 5-mill property tax that appeared on the general election ballot Nov. 4 was overwhelmingly rejected by voters. The tax would have raised about $800,000 a year.

Jurors said the new tax was needed to help them cope with the loss of $2.8 million in local, state and federal revenues. Without the additional income, massive budget cuts and employee layoffs would be inevitable.

Voters turned the tax down by a margin of nearly two-to-one.

Thomas "Moose" Pearce, chairman of the finance committee, said a workforce reduction plan should be formulated by Administrator Moran Watson and Secretary-Treasurer Gwen LeBlanc for jurors to review and consider implementing.

Juror Joseph U. Pierre said he believes a planned road improvement project should be scrubbed to avoid laying off workers and reducing parish services.

"I don't support laying off one soul," Pierre said. "Most of the people that were hired by me have seniority."

But Pierre's idea did not catch on.

"I don't like to hear that kind of talk," said Juror Marvin Braud. The budget cannot be balanced without reductions in both services and workers, he said.

"How are you going to get the money if you don't have the money? We're going to have to make some cuts," Braud said.

LeBlanc said more than $2.4 million in spending is projected for the general fund next year, but revenues are estimated at only $1.5 million. The fund will have an accumulated balance of $261,262 at the start of 1987, she said.

At that rate of spending, the general fund will experience a deficit of nearly $600,000 at the end of 1987. The projections are expected to plunge the fund into a serious cash-flow problem as well, LeBlanc said.

"We project we'll be out of cash in the general fund at the end of March," LeBlanc said.

The 10 percent across-the-board cut in parish offices and departments will save about $285,000 next year, LeBlanc said.

The offices affected include the sheriff, clerk of court, registrar of voters, district attorney, parish and district courts, rural fire departments, the food stamp office, the council on aging and all other agencies funded by the parish.

Jurors cut another $110,000 out of the budget by increasing employees' share of the cost of insurance from 20 to 50 percent.

They also approved $4,900 in cuts by agreeing to stop funding the Junior Livestock Program, 4-H Clubs, the East Ascension Fair and Strawberry Festival and the National Guard.

"We're not in a giveaway situation," said Juror Darnell Martinez.

At the start of the meeting, State Rep. Melvin Irvin unveiled a plan to increase local tax revenues by rolling back the $75,000 homestead exemption.

"This may be setting a bad precedent," said Irvin, a Gonzales Democrat. "I feel like we have to do something to generate some revenues back to the local governing bodies."

If the rest of the Legislature agrees, Irvin said he will ask for a referendum in his legislative district to reduce the homestead exemption to $50,000.

"I don't think that would affect a whole lot of people," Irvin said. However, it would provide much-needed revenues for school boards, police jurys and cities in the area, he said.

"Somebody's got to have guts enough to go against the system. And the system's been that this (the homestead exemption) is a sacred cow," Irvin said.

The legalities of the proposal have not been worked out, he said. Four bills to reduce the homestead exemption statewide have all died in legislative committees, Irvin said.