Ascension-St. James Airport Authority appropriation survives budget ax

By VICKI FERSTEL
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A $20,000 Ascension-St. James Airport Authority appropriation tagged onto the state budget in the waning days of the regular legislative session has survived Gov. Buddy Roemer's budget ax.

The funding continues a history of direct state operating grants to the airport authority, some of which have raised eyebrows on the state level.

If and when the project is completed, former Gov. Edwin Edwards has promised to move his two aircraft to the site. He and Sen. Joseph Sevario, D-Prairieville, secured the funding by amending the appropriations bill when it got to the Senate floor. State Department of Transportation and Development officials expressed surprise when they learned of the appropriation.

Sevario said he and state Rep. Melvin Irvin Jr., D-Gonzales, met with DOTD Secretary Neil Wagoner, Joe Lavrea of the Office of Aviation, and Airport Authority Chairman Nicky Prejean three months ago about the funding.

The airport authority requested $20,000 for expenses that included three bills previously denied by DOTD.

In March, Lavrea denied payment of a November 1987 bill for $2,000 from Sorrento Lumber Co. for grading a roadbed to the airport tract; a November 1987 bill for $20,000 from the state Office of Risk Management for a check indicated there was no request from Edwards to Prejean. Also approved were $150 for travel expenses for Prejean and Dotson.

According to Lavrea, the airport authority is the only airport in the state to take money from the state budget and operate funds from the state. The Ascension-St. James Airport Authority is a regional state agency that operates under the jurisdiction of DOTD.

Lavrea wrote to authority Secretary Judy McLane that because the state never agreed to make those payments, those items were not included in the current budget and are ineligible for payment.

Wagoner said he received a telephone call from Sevario and Sen. Don Kelly, D-Natchitoches, about the bills, but again refused to pay them.

According to airport authority files, the authority's insurance from the Office of Risk Management was canceled on July 1 because the premium was never paid.

The $20,000 appropriation, which did not receive scrutiny by either Senate or House budget committees, also will be used for the authority members' per diems, office supplies and travel expenses for Prejean and urban planner La Cutrer Jr. of Berger, Barnard and Thomas Engineering Inc. of Baton Rouge.

Prejean said the $20,000 is not enough.

"We need the state to do what they're supposed to do and get the project on stream," Prejean said. Specifically, Prejean wants the state to enter into and pay for the contract with Berger, Barnard and Thomas.

When asked who was legally responsible for the contract, Prejean said, "I think it's the state's responsibility to tell me that.

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