Budget problems aired

By JO CART

CROWLEY — Officials met here Tuesday morning with the Acadia Parish Police Jury, which is complaining that it doesn’t have enough money to meet the demands of parish agencies.

The jury is expected to approve its 1997 budget Wednesday morning.

The officials attending the meeting included 15th Judicial District Court Judges, Sheriff Ken Goes, Clerk of Court Andrus Barousse, Assessor Russell Benoit, Registrar of Voters Martin Venable and District Attorney Nathan Stansbury.

“We’ve asked you here this morning to give us your ideas on how we can find the money to meet our budget,”’ jury President Joe Baronet told the officials.

“We’ve taken everything we legally can from the parish road fund and moved it to the general fund.

“The only other thing we can do is to close every office in the parish that is not mandated,” Baronet added. “We need your help.”

Joe Arabie, jury secretary-treasurer, said the parish judiciary needs an additional $30,000 to meet expenses for the rest of 1996. The November bills for the criminal court fund have not been paid, he said.

“We have no choice. We are mandated to pay these bills,” said Juror Dan Rogers.

“I have trouble with this mandated stuff,” said Juror Nelson Arceneaux. “If we don’t have the money, how could we pay it?”

District Judge Don Aaron said judges’ secretaries have not been paid.

“We met with you last year, and we thought that you understood that there was no question about it that these bills had to be paid,” the judge said.

“Who set our priorities on these mandated bills?” asked Rogers. “Who comes first — you, the sheriff, the clerk of court or who? We don’t have enough money for everyone.”

“You have to pay these obligations,” Aaron replied.

In other words, you are saying that we should close everything in the parish to pay you all,” said Baronet.

The jury has cut its budget by 41 percent, Baronet said, including a 28 percent pay cut for jurors’ salaries, but no cuts have been made in the judiciary. Some court employees received a 10 percent raise this year, he said.

After the judges left, jurors complained about the expenses of renovating judges’ offices, and they said one judge made the jury pay for installation of an ice maker in his office, and another judge demanded and got a new desk costing $1,633.

Baronet said all three judges in the parish insisted on their own law libraries, costing almost $90,000. Parish Attorney Ron Bertrand told the jurors that they could refuse to pay the bills, forcing the matter into the courts.

Jury accountant Steve Lambousy outlined a number of possible cuts, including the closure of the parish food-stamp office, planning and zoning office, engineering office, juvenile detention department and civil defense, and elimination of police jurors’ salaries.

But jurors favored the possibility of making a 9 percent reduction in all expenses and elimination of all offices except the food-stamp office.

Clerk of Court Barousse said that he would be willing to accept a funding cut and that he would absorb $52,000 in expenses that he has not turned over to the jury for reimbursement.