College funds in debate

By SCOTT DYER
Capitol news bureau

Despite support from Gov. Edwin Edwards, a proposal to protect colleges from mid-year budget cuts ran into stiff opposition Monday from a House committee.

Members of the House Appropriations Committee argued that too much of the state budget is already protected from mid-year cuts.

Rep. Jimmy Long, D-Natchitoches, went before the committee with HB1026, which would require a two-thirds vote of the Legislature to make a mid-year budget cut to higher education.

However, lawmakers argued Monday that Long’s bill would paint the state even further into a corner in times of fiscal crisis.

Instead of leaving 31 percent of the state budget open to cuts, Long’s proposal would restrict the cuts to 21 percent, the lawmakers said.

Committee Chairman Rep. Elias “Bo” Ackal, D-New Iberia, argued that Long’s bill should be moving in the other direction so that mid-year cuts could be made to parts of the budget like elementary and secondary education that are now protected or “dedicated.”

“I had to operate a bank the way we operate state government, we’d be in (Chapter 7 bankruptcy) tomorrow,” Ackal said.

However, Rep. Joe Salter, D-Florien, said the reason so much of the budget is protected against cuts is because voters don’t trust legislators to make the right decisions.

“Most of the people don’t have a high level of confidence in us and until that changes — and I don’t know when or if it will — then I don’t think they’re in a mood to undedicate anything,” Salter said.

Appearing before the committee, Edwards said he would either see other parts of the budget lose their protection against budget cuts, but added such a bill might “kill the chance of passing.

At one point, the governor added Long’s bill “is quite, a safe step in the right direction for a good day.” Forcing the issue of budget cuts protection is likely to force “a break in the logjam” that severely limits where the state can make cuts, Edwards said.

Edwards said past mid-year cuts to higher education have forced LSU tuition to increase from about $1,200 per year in 1985 to about $2,500 today.

Likewise, tuition at Southern University has increased over the past decade from about $700 to about $2,000 a year.

The governor said Louisiana college students currently pay 40 percent of the cost of their education, compared with an average of 25 percent in other states.

After some discussion, committee members amended Long’s bill to allow widespread cuts in currently protected areas of the budget during fiscal crisis.

The amendment by Rep. David Vitter, R-Metairie, would allow the governor to make cuts of up to 5 percent to protected parts of the budget after the unprotected parts had been cut by 3 percent.

However, Ackal delayed a final vote on Long’s bill, saying he wants to meet with Long about some other possible changes.

Because Long’s bill is a constitutional amendment, it will require a two-thirds vote of both houses of the Legislature and endorsement by state voters.