Community college plan getting united Acadiana support

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

Acadiana lawmakers hope they have unified their delegation behind creation of a community college system with a campus in Lafayette — even if the system's name and one of its campuses depart from the original plan.

The Acadiana delegation met Wednesday night to work out the concerns of some of its members about the new system, which would begin with three campuses by expanding the academic offerings at existing vocational-technical schools, including Lafayette Regional Technical Institute.

The struggle for passage continues. The House has passed its version of the bill. The Senate Education Committee decided Thursday to defer the committee's vote until June 1.

Rep. Jerry Luke LeBlanc, D-Lafayette and one of the key authors behind the community college bill, said the purpose of the bill remains to create a "dual track" system, not to replace existing vo-tech training.

"We do not want and will not stand for the deauthorization of vocational-technical education," LeBlanc said.

The name change addresses the concern of state Sen. Don Cravins, D-Lafayette. He believes the community college system should have a name that reflects all the region's people.

So out went the "Acadiana" designation and its focus on people of French-Canadian stock. Instead, each of the system's schools would be identified as "South Louisiana Community College," followed by the name of the school's home town. So the three schools that would be created beginning July 1 — the bill has provisions for future campuses elsewhere in Acadiana — would be South Louisiana Community College at Lafayette, at New Iberia and, after changes in the Senate, at Abbeville.

The third campus was originally to be T.H. Harris Technical Institute in Opelousas. A recommendation from the Board of Regents said Harris should be linked not to the South Louisiana system, but to Louisiana State University-Eunice.

"It now brings a vo-tech element to LSU-E's mission," LeBlanc said. The delegation has pushed hard
for the community college system. The system would be created by adding academic courses at currently existing vo-tech schools.

Proponents say community colleges would make post-secondary education more affordable and more flexible for local people. The schools would also be able to turn out technically skilled workers for business and industry.

Opponents have included regional interests and representatives of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which would lose control of the three Acadiana vo-tech schools. The new community colleges would become part of the Louisiana Board of Trustees system, which also governs USL.

LeBlanc characterized BESE’s opposition as a “traditional turf battle.”

But Cravins, who testified Thursday in favor of the community colleges, said opposing testimony scored points.

He said the need to seek accreditation may force the schools to devote more resources to academics than the lawmakers now believe. Accreditation will be important to the faculty and to the students who want to transfer their credits to four-year schools.

“Frankly, after listening to the opponents this morning, I have some new concerns,” Cravins said. “Can we legally assure that vocational education will not be replaced by a strictly academic curriculum?”

The Senate Education Committee is supposed to resume deliberations on the bill Thursday.

LeBlanc has had to work hard to create a consensus for the community college system, first among the Acadiana lawmakers and now among all the legislators. He says he’d gladly do it again.

“I have not seen any piece of legislation in my seven years of service (in the Legislature) that has a greater potential to really, positively affect Acadiana,” LeBlanc said.