Cosper says no cut ideas in plan

By SCOTT DYER
Capitol news bureau

State Higher Education Commissioner Sammie Cosper on Monday said secret sections of a draft master plan do not contain the blueprint for immediate cuts to higher education spending that lawmakers expect to find.

"What they are looking for is not in that plan—it was never meant to be in the plan," Cosper told the Baton Rouge Press Club.

Cosper has been ordered to appear before the House Education Committee late this week with a copy of the draft master plan as it appeared before it was revised to delete material that Attorney General Richard Ieyoub feared might compromise the state's appeal of a federal desegregation order. The order threatens to restructure higher education.

Some legislators on the committee suspect that portions of the plan deleted at Ieyoub's direction may include information on duplicate college programs and could help make budget cuts to higher education.

Ignoring a gag order from the Board of Regents, Cosper said an entire section on desegregation was deleted during the rewrite of the master plan.

Cosper said portions of the master plan pertaining to the duplication of college programs were supposed to be phased in gradually and were not intended to resolve immediate budget problems.

"The master plan's thrust was based on looking at duplication over a rather long period of time so that we could look at what was necessary and what was unnecessary duplication and arrange to get rid of that unnecessary duplication," Cosper said.

Commissioner of Higher Education Sammie Cosper says lawmakers will be surprised to see the full draft of the higher education master plan.

Advocate staff photo by Bill Feig
Cosper said. “But we didn’t expect to do it in three months—we expected to do it over an 18- to 24-month period.”

Most of the unnecessary duplication that exists in higher education today was established back in the economic boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s when the state revenues were plentiful, Cosper said.

Cosper argued that eliminating programs—and allowing students in those programs to change their majors or to transfer to other Louisiana public universities—will not begin to save enough to offset the 23 percent cuts in state funding proposed for higher education.

The only way to save meaningful amounts statewide is to cap enrollment, he said, noting that Louisiana’s public colleges should have turned away students during the budget cuts of the mid-1980s.

“I think we in higher education—and I say we because I was part of that decision—made a big mistake,” Cosper said. “I think somewhere about 1985 or 1986, we should have started turning students away (because of budget cuts).”

Instead, the state colleges tried to make ends meet by skimping on equipment, maintenance, library books and other purchases, he said. Eventually, the cuts began to affect the academic area by increasing class sizes, he said.

As universities continued to do their job in spite of the budget cuts, they left the impression with some state officials that they were indeed fat, Cosper said.