Deficit expected in state DWI fund

By MARSHA SHULER
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The director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission expects requests for state money to help combat the drunken driver to exceed funds available by possibly as much as $5 million.

"I really expect $5 million to $10 million in requests," said Stephen Young, commission director, "and we have only got $2 million available."

Young said he is basing that estimate on the "tons of requests" that have been coming in to his office since the fund was established in the January special session of the Legislature.

Formal requests have not been submitted yet because application forms have not been distributed and guidelines under which the requests will be considered are being established.

"In 30 days or so we will have a box of these (applications) back," Young said.

Young said at that time, the commission and the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Criminal Justice will have its hands full as decisions are made on the DWI funding requests.

A meeting to begin considering requests will likely be held during the second week in March, Young said.

"We need to be as fair as possible to all sections of the state," Young said. "We in good-faith judgment can not approve a grant of $600,000 or $700,000 from one place."

Young said if the commission did that, it would be possible to spend all the money in two or three parishes – East Baton Rouge, Orleans and Jefferson – leaving other local governments and law enforcement jurisdictions without fund assistance.

"We need to strike some kind of balance," he said.

Young told the Highway Safety Commission at a Friday meeting that it is facing "a rather touchy job trying to administer the money."

Young said he expects to get applications for funding "from as high as you can imagine to $5,000 or $6,000 for one piece of equipment."

He said judging from the calls his office has been receiving, many applications will involve jails and supervision for DWI offenders placed on probation. In addition, Young said there has been considerable activity in the substance abuse area.

The new DWI law that went into effect Jan. 1 requires either the serving of a jail term or performance of community service work. In addition, offenders would participate in a substance abuse or drivers education program as deemed necessary.

The legislation was approved in the 1982 regular session. However, the Treen administration had to come back in the recent special session with two bills to help local government come up with funds to enforce the law.

Treen called the bills "further weapons in our war against the drunk driver."

One bill established a $50 extra court levy on DWI offenders with the money staying in the hands of local officials who must enforce mandatory penalty provisions of the law. The extra court levy is expected to raise about $800,000.

The $2 million DWI Law Enforcement Fund was established in the other bill.

Under grant guidelines, a local government or law enforcement agency can request assistance for enforcement personnel or equipment, prosecution, probation supervision, supervision of work release programs, acquisition and space of incarcerating facilities and alcohol and substance abuse programs.

Young said he expects the first grants to be awarded by April 1. Under terms of the legislation, the Highway Safety Commission and the Commission on Law Enforcement must make a decision on an application within 30 days of receipt and forward its recommendation to the governor.

Within 45 days of the application's receipt, the governor may make a grant.