Don’t Repeat Old Mistakes

Taxpayers in this community have shedded out millions of dollars in taxes to fund construction of the Lafayette Cajundome and Vermilionville. These facilities have not yet become self-sufficient and are dependent on government subsidies and loans to break even.

To put it mildly, mistakes have been made in their planning and operation.

Now there’s a proposal in the Legislature to direct even more public money to the Cajundome and Vermilionville, as well as the privately owned Acadian Village. Legislation by Rep. Jerry LeBlanc would, in effect, let Lafayette keep 1 cent of the 4 cent state sales tax on hotel rooms for use at these facilities.

The intent of the bill is a thorough analysis up-front. We can’t afford to make those same mistakes again. This time, let’s do it right.

The Vermilionville and Acadian Village money, before any money is spent at the Cajundome, some $333,000 of the tax will be directed to Vermilionville and $166,000 to Acadian Village.

The biggest need at both facilities is operational money. Both have been running a deficit, though Vermilionville officials say their situation is improving.

But LeBlanc says that none of the money is to be spent on day-to-day operations. His intent is that it be used on capital needs only.

Acadian Village director A.J. LeBlanc has said that the buildings at his facility need repair work.

Vermilionville director Stan Broxby says he wasn’t aware of the bill until after LeBlanc introduced it, but called it “a pleasant surprise.” He would like to use the money to construct a pedestrian connection between Vermilionville and the Jean Lafitte National Park facility, now under construction in Beaver Park.

Local tourism director Gerald Breaux would like to see the money directed into an aggressive marketing and advertising program for Vermilionville. That would generate more visitors and increase ticket sales, he suggests.

More specifics about how the money will be spent is needed, or at least some understanding among the key officials.

And to be quite blunt, we need some assurances that Vermilionville, in particular, is still going to be in business two years from now, before we commit hundreds of thousands of dollars to more construction and promotion.

Cooperation among agencies is important. Everyone involved with tourism and conventions in the city must be on the same page when it comes to allocating the money from this tax. Already, there are differences emerging over how the money should be spent at the Cajundome.

LeBlanc argues that the dollars should be used only to build the exhibit hall. No way, he says, should the money be used on the existing facility.

Way, says Cajundome Commission member Glenn Weber. The commission wants to start putting money aside in anticipation of future repair needs. He thinks that the new state money might be well-spent for that purpose.

Furthermore, says Weber, the idea of an exhibit hall hasn’t even been discussed in recent years, and there are no plans underway for such a facility.

There is no such thing as free money. It is very easy to play fast and loose with this tax money since it’s generated by tourists, not local residents, and it’s a state tax, not a local one.

But the $250,000 that will accrue annually to Lafayette comes right out of a state budget that already has more holes in it than swiss cheese. Don’t forget, we as taxpayers of Louisiana are responsible for the state deficit.

But it’s only $250,000, one might respond, a drop in a (leaky) bucket. Well, you can bet that if Lafayette is successful in securing a penny of the hotel sales tax for its use, every tourist commission in the state will ask the same. To paraphrase the late U.S. Sen. Everett Dirksen, a penny here and a penny there, and pretty soon you’re talking about real money.

This might all sound nitpicking and negative thinking. It’s not. Well-spent, the state money could be a real asset to our developing tourism industry. But too often in the past we have wasted public dollars in this area because we did not perform thorough analysis up-front.

We can’t afford to make those same mistakes again. This time, let’s do it right.