Edwards sees no budget axe for higher education

By Mike Hasten
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — Higher education officials can rest easier tonight. Gov. Edwin Edwards says he has no plans to cut university funding.

The governor told reporters Tuesday that he sees no reason to cut the budget, despite Commissioner of Administration Raymond Laborde's warning that the state soon face a deficit.

"It is premature to suggest that budget cuts are in the future for our budget year," the governor said.

Laborde says a provision in the appropriations bill requires him to pay all judgments against the state and so far, he is $41 million short because the Legislature appropriated $34 million and judgments total $75 million.

Edwards admits "there is a great deal of uncertainty" about whether the state will receive enough revenue to pay off all its expenses, which is what led Laborde to urge him to order cuts to keep the budget in balance.

"That may be the reality," Edwards said, but before any cuts are ordered, "I'm going to wait until the last possible moment and get all the information needed before making a determination about where we are."

Two years ago, Edwards took what he calls a "regretful action" that was "unnecessary and certainly premature" when he ordered October budget cuts because funding was running short. But when the fiscal year ended, a $104 million surplus was discovered, meaning the cut was unnecessary. "I am not going to rush into cutting the budget until I am absolutely certain that that is essential" to balance the books, he said.

With 72 percent of the budget dedicated to specific purposes, cuts affect only 28 percent of state functions. Higher education makes up about half of the cuttable portion. Most of the rest is in health care.

The governor said he plans to pay only $34 million in judgments that the Legislature appropriated funds to cover, despite language in the budget that says if costs exceed that amount, the budget will be cut accordingly.

"I cannot pay judgments out of non-existent funds," he said. "Somebody may force me to do it but absent of being ordered by a court of last resort I'm not going to take the money out of special education, higher education and health care services to pay judgments."

Describing as "imprudent legislative action" the language in the act requiring payment of all judgments, Edwards said, "I may change my mind but at this moment, I do not intend to respect it."

Edwards said if he is forced to order cuts because of judgments or the federal government cutting $750 million in Medicaid funds, "it is not my intention to move into the 28 percent area of the budget — health care services and higher education — and effect cuts."

Higher education and health care have been cut eight times in the past 11 years.

Instead, the governor said that if necessary he will call the Legislature into special session to consider "some alternate things to avoid having higher education and health care services bear the brunt of these cuts."

Among those options is a never-used legislative procedure that will allow cuts in dedicated portions of the budget — namely, the more than $2 billion funding to public schools. To do so would require a two-thirds vote of both houses of the Legislature.

Also, the governor mentioned his failed plan to re-impose a state property tax that would be dedicated to higher education. However, "at this point in my career" he does not believe he could convince legislators to vote for a tax, especially after having failed to pass a tax on hazardous waste.

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Edwards: No cuts

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