Group to study drug tests

By JIM McDONNELL
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A task force will explore drug-testing options for city-parish employees, the Metro Council decided on Wednesday after two and a half hours of discussion on an item introduced by Councilman Gordon Curry.

Mayor Pro Tem Mike Roubique will appoint the group.

Curry's proposal called for a program of voluntary testing.

Mayor Pat Screen, who has expressed reservations about the proposal, said he could support drug testing only as an integral part of an overall employee assistance program.

Where the money for such a program would come from is an unanswered question. The city-parish had such a program, at a cost of $100,000 a year, with Hidalgo & Associates until last year's fiscal crisis forced its abandonment.

How much testing would cost is another unresolved issue. Prices quoted by various sources during the meeting ranged from $8 per test to $100 per test, or a possible total of $28,000 to $356,000.

Under questioning by Councilman Larry Bankston, Arthur Peterson of Laboratory Specialists in Belle Chasse said he has never seen a positive test result in a voluntary program. But

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Peterson said the tests are accurate. He said he finds a false positive rate of less than 1 percent.

John "Red" Bourg, assistant to the president of the state AFL-CIO, said there was no such thing as a genuinely voluntary program because those who refuse to participate are stigmatized by their refusal. He added that an incorrect false positive reading could ruin a person for life.

Bourg and several others said the money could be better spent on more police to combat illegal drugs.

Bankston said the outcome of the meeting proved his earlier point that the agenda item was "nothing but a publicity stunt and not a very well thought out one. We talked for two and a half hours, and what came out of it? We're against drug abuse."

All did agree there was a drug problem. Harley Brown, local manager for Browning-Ferris Industries, said 70 percent of the city-parish employees who applied to his company during the transition to private garbage pickup failed their drug screening.

Councilman Kip Holden said he had read of blacks yielding a high percentage of false positive results because of the relatively high degree of melanin in their systems. Peterson was critical of Holden's sources and said that had never been a problem in his experience.