Highway aid for La. reinstated
Louisiana’s ‘watered down’ drinking law satisfies feds

Capitol news bureau

A new law raising the legal drinking age in Louisiana has convinced federal officials to reinstate $15 million worth of highway aid being withheld from the state, Gov. Edwin Edwards announced Friday.

The Federal Highway Administration held up the money — 5 percent of the state’s federal highway subsidies for the current fiscal year — when lawmakers failed to raise the drinking age before a deadline set by the federal government last year.

The Legislature did raise the minimum age for buying alcoholic beverages from 18 to 21 during a special session last December.

Edwards said he was informed Friday that the new law, criticized as too weak by some and as unfair by others, “will bring Louisiana into compliance with the National Minimum Drinking Age statute.”

“I am pleased that legislators and I were able to work together to ensure the state’s receipt of these much-needed federal dollars,” the governor said in a news release.

The law raises the drinking age to 21, effective March 15.

However, a “grandfather” clause in the law allows people born before Oct. 1, 1987 — who are now 19 years old — to continue to buy and consume alcoholic beverages until they reach age 21.

Generally, as of March 15, anyone born on or after Oct. 1, 1967, must wait until they are 21 to drink.

However, the law contains major exceptions, allowing young people to drink alcoholic beverages in private homes and clubs, in the company of parents, spouses and guardians who are over age 21, and for medical and religious reasons.

The federal government, as a means to encourage states to raise their drinking age laws, withholds federal highway aid from states that don’t comply with the federal mandate requiring a drinking age of 21.

Louisiana was the last state to allow anyone to buy any kind of alcoholic beverages at age 18.