House panel amends construction budget

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A House committee Monday added $7 million worth of projects to the state's construction budget, prompting complaints from a Roemer administration official that members were hurting Louisiana's chances of improving its low bond ratings.

Commissioner of Administration Dennis Stine repeatedly asked members of the House Ways and Means Committee to stop approving each other's amendments to the construction budget, also called the capital outlay bill.

By adding more projects to the bill — an outline of Gov. Buddy Roemer's proposed construction spending — committee members were "sending a signal" to investors that they weren't interested in helping cut back government spending.

Stine's pleas prompted sharp criticism from some committee members, who said their spending proposals were just as valid as the administration's.

"There's not two ways to do things around here — y'all's way and the wrong way," said Rep. Al Ater, D-Ferriday.

Roemer has the power to kill each of the projects with a line-item veto.

Stine suggested after the meeting that members who want to add projects should also propose amendments that would delete corresponding amounts of money.

The additions were made to the $480 million portion of the budget that is paid for with money borrowed through the issuance of general obligation bonds. Projects in the bill are arranged in priority categories. As it came out of the committee Monday, the bill contained some $363 million worth of projects likely to get money during the fiscal year that begins July 1.

The cash portion of the $960 million construction bill is to be considered later by the House Appropriations Committee before the whole bill goes to the full House and then the Senate.

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Ater, for example, amended the bill to include $245,000 to purchase land for Lake Bruin State Park. The money would be needed soon, he said, because it surrounds the park and could be sold to developers if the state doesn't move to buy it quickly.

Rep. Harry Benoit, D-Breaux Bridge, added more than $3.4 million in new bridge construction, bridge repair and a small amount of road overlay for an area of St. Martin Parish. He said buses carrying tourists to the area frequently bog down on the gravel roads there now. He said he was afraid the projects wouldn't get any money otherwise.

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