Jurors eye layoffs to cut parish costs

About 50 Ascension workers in danger of losing their jobs

By TIM TALLEY
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DONALDSVILLE — About 50 Ascension Parish Police Jury workers — almost half of the parish's work force — may be laid off under a proposal being considered by police jurors, authorities said Wednesday.

The employees' jobs could be sacrificed to free up funds for a road improvement program that will cost up to $5 million and involve nearly 30 miles of parish roads, officials said.

Massive layoffs is just one of the ideas being considered to cut the parish's expenses and still provide essential services to taxpayers, Administrator Monte Watson said.

Officials expect to lose more than $1 million in revenues from state and federal sources next year, including cuts in state transportation funds and elimination of the federal revenue sharing program.

The parish probably will close out 1986 in the black, but drastic cuts will be required for Ascension to stay financially afloat in 1987, Watson said.

"The trend has been declining revenue since 1983. And the cost of government has been going up since 1983," Watson said.

"I wouldn't say the parish is destitute. I can't say it won't get that way if something isn't done," he said.

The parish collects a 1-cent sales and use tax in unincorporated areas that is expected to raise about $3.3 million this year, down an estimated 8 percent from collections last year.

Sales tax revenues alone are not sufficient to operate the parish at the current level of service and fund the massive road overlay program.

"It is the parish's problem. But I don't think it's something that we can't respond to," Watson said.

"There's an opportunity to keep this parish afloat when a lot of others are going under," he said.

Jurors are expected to discuss the proposed road overlay project at their finance committee meeting in Donaldsville Monday night.

Juror Albert "TJ" Gautreau, chairman of the jury's road committee, said the parish cannot afford the overlay program without reducing the size of its work force and cutting employee costs.

"You've got to balance the budget," Gautreau said. "We're just going to have to bite the bullet. I hate to see people get laid off.

Finance committee Chairman Thomas "Moose" Pearce said jurors eventually will be forced to ask voters to approve new taxes to provide the parish with an extra source of revenue. However, a specific tax proposal has not been discussed, he said.

Watson said he has recommended reducing the parish's work force since he was hired in February 1986. The parish employs about 110 workers. Sixteen workers have been laid off or their jobs eliminated since the start of 1986.

The parish will pay about $260,000 less in salaries next year than it will this year. But more salary reductions will be needed before enough money is available to make the road improvement program affordable, Watson said.

Jurors are considering a road improvement bond issue to renovate parish streets. The bonds would be repaid in five to seven years with sales tax revenues dedicated to retiring the bonds.

A $5 million bond issue would require jurors to dedicate about $1.5 million of the parish's sales tax collections annually for the life of the issue, Watson said. That is nearly half of the parish's total sales tax income.

Dedication of the sales tax revenues for the road project would require the parish to cut services and reduce costs in other areas, "which in turn means cutting some of the labor force," Watson said.

"You can't run a government with no money," he said.

Jurors could avoid most of the threatened layoffs by postponing the road overlay program and using sales tax revenues for operations.

"If they choose to go with the overlay program, and don't go with the layoffs, they're broke," Watson said.