Louisiana doesn't win education research money

By KAREN DIDIER
Capitol news bureau

Louisiana has lost out in competition for $3 million in federal research money, but one of the coordinators of the state's effort to get the grant says reviewers didn't give the state a fair shake.

Don Boesch, who co-chaired a committee that decided which university-based research projects would be included in the state's application to the National Science Foundation, said he feels reviewers based their decision on the state's poor national image and not on what's going on at the present time.

"They were concerned about the state's commitment to research in higher education. I think that was a fair criticism of the past, and it's an example of the kind of problem this program is designed to overcome," Boesch said. "...But, I think they were influenced more about the past or by the popular press image of Louisiana than by what really is."

Boesch said with the commitment of so-called $8 million to education and, in particular to university research, Louisiana has shown it is sincere about future support for research. Louisiana, along with 10 other states and Puerto Rico, were vying for eight five-year grants, valued at $3 million each from the NSF through its Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR).

The program is designed to improve research efforts in states that traditionally have lagged behind in obtaining federal research dollars.

The competition was decided on the basis of a three-phase review, Boesch said.

In the first two phases, Louisiana received good ratings, he said, with one reviewer reporting that possibilities for additional funding "have come at a time and in a form which could advance the research enterprise in Louisiana across a threshold into the nationally competitive arena. This reviewer approached the site visit with extreme skepticism, but was convinced at every level that the process may actually work in Louisiana and is likely a good NSF and national investment." Louisiana apparently lost out in the third phase of the review process, Boesch said, adding that the NSF has not yet provided a definitive word on why.

On the three-page review form, one member of the final review panel simply wrote, "Does not merit EPSCoR support," offering no other explanation, Boesch said.

Another reviewer questioned the state's commitment, writing, "the matching funds... do not represent a new commitment by the state for research report."

Money from an offshore oil settlement has been earmarked for an education improvement trust fund and voters in September locked the trust fund into the state constitution.

The trust fund shows a long-term commitment on the part of the state, Boesch said. One of the areas targeted for trust fund help is high quality research at public and private universities.

"I disagree with the basic tenor that the state commitment is not there," Boesch said. "It seems to me in this day and age that dedication of a source of money through a trust fund is more stable and secure than through general operating funds."

Boesch said he and other higher education leaders will meet with NSF officials next week to learn why the state was turned down.

Louisiana could appeal the decision, but whether it will hasn't yet been determined, he said.

Should the state not implement the research projects contained in its application, it could reapply in two years for funding of the last three years of the five-year program, Boesch said.

States that will receive grants are Alabama, Kentucky, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Vermont and Virginia. Puerto Rico also was selected for funding. Those state's turned down for funding, in addition to Louisiana, are Idaho, Mississippi and South Dakota.