Panel cancels college tuition exemptions

By MIKE HASTEN
State Editor
Baton Rouge — The House Education Committee has voted to cancel college tuition exemptions for survivors of public servants killed in action and for residents over age 60 but chose to continue exemptions for National Guard members.

The state now grants tuition exemptions to survivors of veterans, police, sheriff's deputies, firefighters, teachers and sanitation workers who are killed or disabled in the line of duty. It also exempts members of the National Guard.

But because of budget cuts, the Board of Regents proposed that the exemptions be removed, which would save universities $1.5 million.

Instead of terminating the exemptions immediately, the panel voted to continue the program for those now involved but cut off any new entrants after July 1.

Faced by about 50 guardsmen in uniform, the committee also went along with Lafayette Rep. Mike Thompson's proposal to set aside a bill that would have removed the exemption for National Guardsmen.

Thompson argued that the Legislature needs more information on whether it costs the state or if it is a benefit to allow guardsmen to be exempt.

"It bothers me greatly," Thompson said, "that universities can absorb losses for foreign students but they can't help educate people who are serving the state."

An attorney for the National Guard also said the state might be setting itself up for lawsuits because enlistment contracts signed by recruits call for guardsmen to get free tuition.

Lafayette Rep. Kathleen Blanco, who tried to get the committee to abolish the exemption, said she believes the exemptions should be eliminated until the state is in a better financial position.

Blanco is proposing a bill that would suspend all exemptions until the state can fund universities at 90 percent of the Board of Regents' funding formula.

Following the committee's refusal to eliminate the exemptions this year, Blanco said "the process of eroding the cost-cutting process has obviously begin."