Panel would allow cuts to dedicated funds

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With deep spending cuts on the horizon, a constitutional convention panel Friday proposed allowing previously "untouchable" items in the state budget, such as aid to public schools, to go on the chopping block.

The convention's State Expenditure Committee added the provision to a spending limit proposal that now goes to the convention floor.

The proposal would restrict the use of one-time money and would tighten a constitutional limit on the growth of state spending.

However, some lawmakers warned that exposing currently dedicated programs to the budget ax would rile interests associated with those programs and thus kill attempts to put stronger budget controls in the state constitution.

"I seriously doubt what we passed is going to become law. Today we stirred up an adversarial group — teachers and their families, bus drivers and their families, superintendents," said Sen. Randy Ewing, D-Quitman.

Representatives of the Louisiana School Boards Association testified against the idea, saying that making cuts to school aid without lifting costly state mandates would put school districts in "untenable positions."

"But Copelin said his proposal was not aimed at dedications themselves but with at balancing the budget. "I see this as a sort of emergency provision . . . because an emergency exists, all budgetary items are fair game," said Rep. Sean Heilly, D-Baton Rouge.

"When things take a turn for the worse, everybody's got to step up to the plate," he said.

Sen. Larry Bankston, D-Jackson, called it a "waterfall" amendment, putting everybody in the boat together "instead of having people standing on the bank watching us as we go over."

The spending limit proposal approved by the committee would require that one-time revenues be used only to pay for construction projects and for "extraordinary, non-recurring expenses of government," such as for an economic development project or settlement of a legal dispute.

The decision on what constitutes non-recurring revenue would be left up to the Revenue Estimating Conference, the panel that establishes the revenue base on which the budget is drawn.

The proposal also would set the procedure for determination of a state expenditure limit tied to personal income growth in Louisiana. A squabble developed earlier this year over what funds should be included when setting the expenditure limit that is already called for in the constitution.