Parish granted $200,000 for DWI program

By MIKE DUNNE
Advocate staff writer

The state has granted the parish $200,000 for building a center to handle drinking while intoxicated offenders, but the city-parish is asking that the money be made available for beefing up Operation Checkmate to catch more drunken drivers instead.

Mayor Screen received notice recently that state officials were granting the city-parish $200,000 to defray costs of building a center that Screen had originally envisioned to house DWI offenders, who under a new state law face mandatory incarceration of public service time.

But Screen ran into opposition from judges and other law enforcement officials, and the DWI center is unlikely.

"If it's not dead, it's certainly been put on hold," the mayor said.

The envisioned center would have housed offenders, and they would have gone through rehabilitation programs with the expense being borne by fines.

Judge and law enforcement balked at the idea, and the Screen Administration backed off.

Now, Screen says, the parish will ask that all or part of the money that would have gone to the DWI center be given to the parish to beef up law enforcement.

City police have operated "Operation Checkmate," designed to catch and prosecute DWI offenders, for several years now. The program started out federally funded but has since been operated with local funds, which are becoming increasingly sparse.

The Checkmate program has been singled out for nationwide attention by several groups and was a focal point at a U.S. Mayor's Conference seminar on handling DWIs headed by Screen in early June.

It has also been pointed to with pride by the National Highway Traffic Safety Commission.

"We're doing a good job getting drunks off the road . . . with a winner like we've ought to pour on the coal," Screen said.

The council had authorized the mayor to apply for the DWI center funds while the debate raged over how to handle the new state law on DWI.

Screen said that, while the construction costs could have been met, the operational costs were in question for a DWI center.

Sheriff Fred Sliman told Screen it would take an additional 16 deputies to operate the center and he had no funds for such an increase.

"The local judiciary is exercising its prerogative under the law to alternative sentencing, making use of the excellent probation and parole departments available to both the City Court and the District Court. Sheriff Fred Sliman tells me that he feels as if the space at the Parish Prison is adequate under the circumstances," Screen wrote to state officials.

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One of the considerations for a DWI Center was to lessen the impact on the parish jail facilities, which occasionally have trouble staying under court-mandated maximum populations.

Screen told state officials that the consensus of officials is that the money should go into law enforcement.

"Since federal funding expired, we have continued the program with local monies, but due to the budgetary constraints, it unfortunately has been reduced in scope. The $200,000 grant would once again allow us to fully implement this excellent enforcement program and make the streets of East Baton Rouge Parish much safer for everyone," Screen said in his letter to the state.

The state Highway Safety Commission and the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement was faced with $4 million in requests for only $2 million in funds provide by the state for implementation for the strict new DWI law, which went into effect Jan. 1.

While the mayor said he favored the concept of a special center to handle DWI offenders, it would have been a "bad decision to use the $200,000 to construct a facility with the burden of the operational costs which the sheriff said he doesn't have and the judges have not been enthusiastic about using," Screen said.

In the meantime, the city-parish has made another grant application for the $200,000.