Plan to protect colleges from cuts draws backers

By DOUG MYERS
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University leaders Friday touted a proposed constitutional amendment aimed at protecting the state's colleges and universities from midyear budget cuts.

College presidents, the LSU chancellor and members of the state Board of Trustees for State Colleges and Universities expressed support for Rep. Jimmy Long's proposal to make it harder for lawmakers to slice higher education during a budget year.

The proposal is being offered by Long, D-Natchitoches, because there has been a history of colleges and universities either being hit by midyear cuts or being under the threat of them.

For example, higher education absorbed about half of the $93 million in statewide midyear cuts in 1992.

Board of Trustees for State Colleges and Universities System President James Caillier said the proposed amendment should be passed because of the history of cutting college budgets.

LSU Chancellor William E. "Bud" Davis said the midyear cuts have been "harmful to the stability of the institutions."

University of Southwestern Louisiana President Ray Authement said it would be the "most significant item" that higher education officials could support during the upcoming session of the Legislature.

"It would certainly help us operate our institutions," Authement said. "Planning and functioning would be much easier and more meaningful."

The 1995 regular session begins March 27.

If approved by the Legislature and passed by voters, Long's proposal would prohibit reductions in college funding at midyear unless the governor and two-thirds of the members in the House and the Senate consent to the reduction.

Currently, all it takes for a midyear cut is the approval of the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget after the governor's commissioner of administration proves the state must make cuts to make up for a shortfall.

About 72 percent of the state budget is protected by law, constitutionally or otherwise, from cuts, leaving the remaining 28 percent, which consists mainly of higher education and public health, to pick up the burden for state shortfalls.

Northeast Louisiana University President Lawson Swearingen said the proposed constitutional amendment is "past due."

Swearingen, a former state senator, said it will be an "uphill battle" to convince lawmakers to send the proposed constitutional amendment to voters.