Police Jury rescinds budget cut decision

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DONALDSONVILLE — The Ascension Parish Police Jury Monday night rescinded a decision to cut $16,000 in funding for the County Agent and LSU Cooperative Extension Service offices. Jurors also rescinded a decision they reached earlier this month to log long-distance telephone calls so they can track taxpayer expense to prevent abuses and reduce the parish's telephone bill.

The logging procedure, which had not yet been implemented, was approved after the jury's $10,500 telephone budget for the year was depleted in just eight months. But jurors said the procedure would be inconvenient.

The budget cuts were rescinded without opposition after County Agent Bill Davis said the money is needed for the local offices to operate.

President Alan J. "Boxcar" Braud said the jury will make the money available as long as it is financially feasible. He said the cuts may be reinstated if the jury does not have enough money next year to meet its legal obligations.

The cuts were approved Thursday as part of a budget-reduction package that also involved laying off 20 parish workers and slashing spending in the parish's general fund and road and bridge accounts.

The parish is facing deficits in its 1987 budget due to the loss of about $2.3 million in federal, state and local tax dollars.

The general fund still faces an operating deficit next year of $406,000 in spite of the cuts and a 10 percent across-the-board reduction in spending imposed by jurors on all parish agencies, according to Secretary-Treasurer Gwen LeBlanc.

Davis said the county agent and LSU cooperative extension offices are funded primarily by the state and federal governments. However, he said the Police Jury is providing about $25,000 this year toward operating costs.

Jurors had proposed eliminating $7,600 to pay the county agent's utilities and telephone bill, and charging rent for the extension service's office space to raise $10,800 in revenues.

Davis said an agreement with LSU obligates the jury to provide housing for a local office.

"Without this existing, we cannot exist," Davis said.

Juror Heldon "Jay" Weil Jr. said the parish cannot continue funding programs like the extension service without more local tax revenues.

Weil suggested that the jury propose another millage tax like the 6-mill tax in the Nov. 4 election.

Davis said he and members of his staff would work toward passage of the proposal.

"Our problems are just like your problems," Weil said.

Juror Albert "TJ" Gautreau said other taxing bodies should help the Police Jury pay for the office's expenses.

"I think somebody should bear the burden with us," Gautreau said.

Davis said he spoke with a School Board official about additional revenues, but no promises were made.

Jurors voted to do away with the new telephone logging system after several jurors said it would be a nuisance and is not needed to reduce telephone expenses.

"It think it's petty," said Juror Carey Fredrick.

Juror Darnell Martinez said he turned in his Police Jury telephone charge card rather than have to log his calls. Juror Thomas "Moose" Pearce said he had started logging his telephone calls and said the procedure is inconvenient.

The vote on the motion to rescind passed 5-3 with one abstention. Juror Joseph U. Pierre was absent, and Braud did not vote.

Juror Marvin Braud, who suggested the policy earlier this month, said it was intended to stop abuses such as those which exhausted jurors telephone budget this year.

"We want to save money? This is the way to save money," he said.

"I've never abused anything since I've been on the Police Jury... I honor the taxpayer's money," Weil said.

Juror Milton "Needless" Vicknair said the jury should investigate Police Jury agencies and departments whose phone bills exceed their budgets.

Jurors reported that their long-distance bills have dropped dramatically since the spring and summer, when bills exceeded $2,000 a month.

The latest bill totaled $272 not including the $198 long-distance bill of John Russell, a consultant on the parish jail expansion project.

In another action, jurors:
- Rescheduled a discussion of the financial status of the East Ascension General Hospital in Gonzales when East Ascension officials failed to appear at the meeting.
- Rescinded an Oct. 16 resolution to have a $10,000 state grant awarded to the River Region Resource Development agency.