Reading program falls in budget struggle

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The House Appropriations Committee beat back an attempt Wednesday to restore spending to a regional education program and continued its drive to produce a balanced budget.

Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, made a half-hearted try to give back to the SPUR reading program most of its $2.4 million cut from the proposed budget on Tuesday.

"We have too many layers, too much overlapping, and it's hard to pin down who's doing a good job," said Thompson as he sought to cut just 20 percent of the program's budget, giving local school boards a chance to pick up the program if they think it's valuable.

Thompson's motion to return the funds to the Special Program for Upgrading Reading failed 8-3.

The committee began its second day of hearings on the state's $6 billion operating budget, facing several attempts to undermine its successful $432 million budget cutting and revenue raising session of Tuesday.

State government faces a potential budget deficit as much as $800 million next year if the Legislature fails to cut spending or raise revenues to offset the possible shortfall. The state constitution requires a balanced budget.

While on Tuesday the committee approved cutting the budget of the LSU Agricultural Center by $1.2 million, the panel approved a reduction of $2.4 million on Wednesday, following the recommendation of the governor's office included in the general appropriations bill, HB228 by Rep. Raymond Laborde, D-Marks.

The House cut $200,000 for the T.H. Harris Scholarship Fund, a program that gives grants to top students who maintain a "B" average in their college work.

The $200,000 was funded by cutting a like amount from $685,000 appropriated to television and radio in New Orleans.

But the biggest debate was over the SPUR reading program.

"We got more mail about the SPUR than any other, except from the churches on gambling," said Rep. Joe Delpit, D-Baton Rouge.


SPUR employees provide guidance to teachers in their reading classes. About 70 coordinators and specialists operate out of eight regional offices, the committee was told.

George Silbernagle, analyst for the Legislative Fiscal Office, said the Fiscal Office chose SPUR as a possibility for budget cutting on the basis that local governments need to pay a greater share of costs.

Louisiana ranks 18th in the amount of money appropriated to local governments, said Silbernagle, but on the amount the local governments contribute, it ranks 35th.

"Local need to pay a greater share," he said.

"It's simply grown into a bureau in the Department of Education," he said.

SPUR was conceived as a pilot project," said Silbernagle.