Roemer unhappy with corrections officials, LTI

By MARSHA SHULER
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Gov. Buddy Roemer said he is unhappy with state corrections officials for holding back information about problems at the Louisiana Training Institute in East Baton Rouge Parish and plans to take immediate steps to improve conditions at the facility for juvenile offenders.

“I am somewhat put off that our Department of Corrections has not addressed these and other problems,” Roemer said when asked his reaction to an East Baton Rouge Parish grand jury report critical of LTI conditions.

Roemer said the LTI situation is not the first time he has been left unaware of problems by corrections officials.

He specifically mentioned activities surrounding U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola’s declaration of a state of emergency at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

“My first impression at Angola was there was no emergency... I was wrong,” Roemer said.

“I have informed the Department of Corrections that the federal judge and other grand juries should not have information that I don’t have. I want to know what the truth is. If we have got a problem, let’s solve it.”

Roemer said he read over the weekend the grand jury report that was issued Friday.

“I look at the report as constructive if we act on it. We will act on it,” he said.

In recent months, Roemer has issued a declaration of emergency and given to corrections the authority to spend $7.6 million for Angola and $2.9 million for the juvenile corrections system.

Polozola previously had pointed to problems in the juvenile corrections system, which stem from a lack of space to handle offenders sentenced to state facilities.

In the report, the jurors ask Roemer to launch investigations of the operation of all state juvenile facilities to determine “the effectiveness of public monies being spent in relation to the results obtained.”

“We are appalled at the conditions found at LTI,” the report says, noting that three prior grand juries have reported deficiencies and “little, if anything, has been done to remedy the situation.”

The grand jury specifically singled out problems with maintenance of LTI’s buildings and grounds.

“These buildings and grounds are state property that have not been, and are not being, maintained at a level to prevent drastic loss in value and utility. ... We also expect that the institution be managed and operated so that the plant facilities and equipment be maintained and used so that they are conserved,” the jurors said.

The jurors said they believed rehabilitation of offenders was unlikely to occur in the existing environment.

The jurors said they found 10 computers in a classroom that were covered and showed no sign of use.

Corrections assistant secretary Don Wydra acknowledged Friday that the condition of the facility had deteriorated in recent years due to budget cuts and lack — until recently — of an organized maintenance program.

Wydra said his office has been working closely with the governor’s office and the federal court in an effort to upgrade the department’s entire juvenile system.

He said his office was not asked to provide any information to the grand jury regarding LTI.