School Board Hears Legislators’ Report

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CROWLEY—A report from area legislators on recent state budget cuts was heard by members of the Acadia Parish School Board here Monday night.

State Senator Cecil Picard was joined by Representatives Dale Sittig and Donald Thibodeaux in addressing the Board concerning legislative action as it pertained to education.

Sen. Picard was first to speak, calling the recent $475 million cuts to education “just short of a criminal act.” He pointed out that local school boards are these days facing a “triple-whammy,” with cuts on the federal and state levels and decreasing income from local taxes.

He went on to say that, while cuts were inevitable, he felt that the legislature was not selective enough. “Instead of trimming off just the fat, some of the lean was cut and some of the fat was left,” he said.

Rep. Sittig centered his address on the $400 million deficit now facing the state.

He explained that some $200 million of that total is actually carried over from last fiscal year when dedicated funds were “tapped” in a last-ditch attempt to balance the budget. While these funds do not necessarily have to be replaced this year, they will have to be replaced eventually, he pointed out.

Rep. Thibodeaux was the self-proclaimed pessimist of the group. He told board members that he expected the state deficit to reach the $600 million mark before the end of the fiscal year.

He also expressed regret that cuts were made in education, but pointed out that education represents 42 percent of the state budget.

He said that he felt a need to return to some sort of local tax base for education, pointing out that while Louisiana ranks 18th in the nation in state funding to education, local funding, on a statewide basis, ranks 48th.

He anticipated more belt-tightening in the future. “If any cuts were out of the excess,” he claimed. “Any future cuts, and there will be some, will be out of the meat.”

All three commented that the recent passage of the Amendment No. 1 was “a big step forward for education and speaks well for the public opinion of the need for good education in the state.”

“State government has become a superstructure. Cuts need to be made in the hierarchy, not down here at the working level,” stated Thibodeaux, who, as a member of both the Budget and Appropriations Committees, told Board members of the problems those two groups had encountered during the recent session.

Thibodeaux said that when the committee suggested that cuts be made in the “hierarchy,” an attorney general’s ruling was sent down stating that the committee could demand only that cuts be made, not where they should be made.

Thibodeaux was joined by Sen. Picard in suggesting a reorganization of state government. “We will have to completely reorganize the system from the ground floor up,” stated Picard. “We have to change our priorities so that we can work with the money we have. That’s the way it’ll have to be.”

In closing, Rep. Sittig warned Board members that some programs may be completely wiped out. “Some of these programs were started when money was good. But now we can no longer afford them,” he commented, adding, “We may have to cut them out, not just down.”

In other action, the board authorized President John D. Sittig to appoint a committee to study the possibility of reducing the size of the board.

This will be a joint effort with the Acadia Parish Police Jury, who has already appointed such a committee, and does not necessarily mean that the board size will be reduced, explained Superintendent Dr. James Griffin.

The committee will consist of Chairman Elmo Orgeron, Wadie Helen Bias, John Lee Smith, Johnson Yeager and Carlton McFarlain.

Also, considerable discussion centered around parish high school bands and their participation in area festivals.

Bill Williams, President of the Crowley Rice Festival Association, asked the board to reconsider a policy adopted in July which mandated that parish bands participate in the Saturday Rice Festival parade and the Sunday Frog Festival Parade provided those respective festival associations pay the travel expenses.

Williams stated that he felt that some of the bands were demanding exorbitant fees to attend the Rice Festival (Oct. 17 and 18) and asked that the Board set some sort of pay schedule.

On the suggestion of Board Vice President Grant Link, Williams was instructed to meet with the Executive Committee concerning any fees he felt were too high.

The Executive Committee could then arbitrate the matter.

Also concerning the Rice Festival, Dr. James M. Griffin, Superintendent, read a letter from Church Point High School Principal Coley Bellamy requesting that his band be excused from participation in the Saturday Parade so that they might attend a marching bands festival in Morgan City that same day.

The letter stated that the band would attend the Friday Night’s Parade.

After discussing the matter, the board voted to deny the request and enforce the policy requiring bands to attend the Saturday Grand Parade. M.W. “Mickey” Scanlan recorded the only nay vote.

Candidates from the 26 Acadia Parish schools for “Teacher of the Year” honors were recognized with the winners in each of the three categories receiving special honors.

Nominated from Acadia Parish for the Regional honors were Jill C. McBride of Central Rayne Elementary (kindergarten) in the Elementary Division; Becky Fair Istre of Mermentau Elementary in the Middle-

Junior High Division; and Linda Piper Armstrong of Rayne High in the High School Division.

Each received an engraved plaque. (See related story Page 3B.)

Dr. Griffin presented the sales tax report to the Board stating that September collections this year were $45,403.17 behind figures for the same month last year, representing a decrease of 19.03 percent.

The year-to-date figures were “holding steady 19.19 percent below comparable figures last year. So far this year, the Board has collected $151,809.65 less than it had during the same time span last year.

In other business, the Board:

* recognized Francisco Villa of Spain, foreign exchange student attending Church Point High School, Villa was introduced by Principal Bellamy.

* Adopted one resolution in memory of the late Erwin T. Harmon, former principal in the parish school system, and another setting the week of Oct. 19-25 “Perfect School Attendance Week.”

* Went on record in opposition to the establishment of a hazardous waste disposal plant in Egan.