SECURE eyes investment in education

By Mike Hasten
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — Education is the key to Louisiana's future, a study group has found, but the lack of money to improve it could keep the state locked up.

The Select Council on Revenues and Expenditures says some of the state's sacred cows, particularly homestead exemption and property taxes, might have to be considered if the state is going to get out from under the dark economic cloud that covers it.

The group of business, government and education leaders recognizes the difficulty of making such changes, so it is plugging away at numerous other changes that would improve efficiency and cut costs of operations.

"We are not going to be able to invest more money in public education unless we find it," said SECURE Chairman Lee Griffin.

Now in its second year of operation, SECURE is credited with proposing several changes that already have been implemented and are expected to benefit the state. The group proposed and promoted the move that resulted in the recent approval of a constitutional amendment allowing education trust fund money to be invested in higher-yielding investments. An additional $37 million in interest earnings is expected next year. SECURE also has proposed several money-saving measures that have been adopted by state agencies.

The impending loss of $750 million in federal Medicaid funds is putting a damper on some of SECURE's proposals, which call for investing money in education and economic development measures that are expected to reap benefits greater than the costs.

Because of the impending deficit, "finding money for long-term improvement is going to be a challenge," said SECURE advisor Larry Herman of the KPMG Peat Marwick financial consultants.

The firm is working with state agencies to develop more efficient operating methods and to see if 3,500 state positions targeted in the first year's investigations are really necessary.

Another of the targets is a way to eliminate or at least reduce the teaching of remedial courses at state universities. "Colleges are spending money on what high school should have done," Herman said.

"But the solution to making education better in Louisiana doesn't start in college," Herman said, pointing to statistics that show Louisiana is "woefully" behind other states in subsidized day care and pre-school programs.

Herman said failing to reach more than 7 percent of the "at-risk" students in the state results in a high drop-out rate, discipline problems and juvenile crime. At-risk youngsters often grow up to be burdens on the state by going on welfare or being thrown in prison.

"Early childhood education is our greatest need," said James Caillier, president of the Board of Trustees of State Colleges and Universities and chairman of the SECURE education panel.

Caillier also is promoting a SECURE proposal to improve students' ability to transfer credits earned at one institution to another. That includes credits earned at vo-tech and high schools transferring to colleges.

"We should allow vo-tech students to continue their education and not have to start over if they decide to pursue a bachelor degree," said State Rep. Raymond "LaLa" Lalonde of Carencro, director of the T.H. Harris Vo-tech School in Opelousas and a member of Caillier's committee.

Lalonde said some of the academic courses offered at vo-techs will stack up against introductory college courses, so they should be transferable. Also, a college student who wants to transfer to a vo-tech school should be able to transfer college credits, he said.

"I don't think we will ever have a highway on which students will move freely" from one institution to another, Caillier said, "but we're trying to smooth it out. We could never guarantee that all courses will transfer."

Transferability of courses is crucial if the state is ever to have a community college system, Lalonde said.