Driven by belief in retribution, prosecutor emerges as face of La.'s death penalty

EYE FOR AN EYE

Former Caddo Parish Assistant District Attorney Hugo Holland poses with an antique World War II-era M1 Garand rifle, one of the many weapons he collects, at his home in Shreveport. Holland now helps district attorneys' offices in the state prosecute death penalty cases.

BY JIM MUSTIAN
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SHREVEPORT — When he's not flying his four-seat RV-10 around the state, seeking the death penalty for yet another accused killer or lobbying the Louisiana Legislature to keep the practice of execution, Holland checks his email in a shed in his backyard.

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the state's revenue comes up short. The Senate plan includes 2 percent cuts across most state agencies, but it protects colleges, prisons, social services and the Department of Veterans Affairs from those cuts.

The Senate-backed proposal also includes nearly $18 million for pay raises for some state employees.

"We thought it was a bit more responsible than what was sent over," said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte.

The Republican-controlled House has been adamant in its pursuit of not spending all the money estimated to be available in the coming year. The state has had 15 midyear deficits in the past decade because revenue collections have lagged estimates in recent years. House members also have expressed hesitation toward giving pay raises when other areas of the budget face cuts.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, leads debate Saturday over the $29 billion state budget.

Speaking to reporters Friday, House Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia, said it will be a "struggle" to get members on board with spending all the money available.

"It will be a tough place to start," Barras said.

LaFleur said he thinks the expenses in the Senate plan are reasonable, after weeks of hearing from department heads about what cuts would mean for state services. "I don't find it to be irresponsible or wasteful spending," he said.

The two chambers now have to work out the differences.

Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, has issued a call for a special session to begin 30 minutes after the regular session ends Thursday if lawmakers can't reach an agreement on the budget and other spending issues before then. But leaders of both chambers say they hope it won't be needed.

Last year, legislators opted to only partially fund TOPS for the first time since the program's creation, leaving students to cover more of the costs of going to college during the school year. This time, lawmakers have voiced overwhelming support for fully funding the scholarships, signaling a return to the program's previous award level.

For the nearly 50,000 college students who receive TOPS each year, the program generally covers tuition but doesn't include fees and other costs of attending college. Fully funding the program is expected to cost the state about $233 million in the coming year.

The Senate version of the budget only partially funds the pay raises sought by the state Civil Service Commission, but that would mean pay increases for workers in prisons and child welfare agencies, among others.

During budget hearings, employee pay was a frequently cited concern because the state has high turnover rates in many areas. Supporters of the pay raises say it costs the state to have to frequently train new employees.

The Senate plan would provide raises for the nearly 38,000 state employees in "classified" roles.

"It's certainly a step in the right direction," LaFleur said.

He said one concern that has been highlighted about state worker pay is that agencies with dedicated sources of revenue are able to give raises, while those that rely only on state funding have not. "There is a huge inequity," LaFleur said.

LaFleur said there are areas being cut that would be nice to fund if more money were available. He cited state parks as one area the state isn't spending as much as he would like, calling it a shame that the state parks aren't considered "first class."

"We would like to fund things that are beyond necessary," LaFleur said.

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