Senate panel strips funds from anti-DWI measure

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Funds to establish a $3 million program for aiding local officials in enforcing tough new drunken driving laws were stripped from a legislative bill Thursday by the Senate Finance Committee.

Senators said they may put back at least some of the money if the Treen administration can more fully explain how the funds will be spent.

The House-passed bill will be up for final consideration in the Senate Monday. As now written, it sets up a fund to award law enforcement grants to local agencies, but provides no money for those grants.

"I'm for stopping that (drunken driving), but what do you need the money for?" Sen. Don Kelly, D-Natchitoches, asked administration representatives.

"You can't just come in here and say you want $3 million, especially considering the financial condition of the state," said Sen. Samuel Nunez, D-Chalmette.

Treen's executive counsel Edgar "Sonny" Mouton said some law enforcement agencies don't have the jail space or personnel needed to house and supervise an increased number of persons expected to be prosecuted under the new laws.

The law, which took effect Jan. 1, requires mandatory two-day jail terms, or four days of supervised community service work, for persons convicted of driving while intoxicated.

Treen said he hopes the Senate will provide at least some money for local aid, mainly for construction and lease of prison cells and hiring deputies or prosecutors.

The governor says tough enforcement could save 200 lives a year by reducing traffic accidents caused by drunken drivers.

(Continued from Page One) exactly what local agencies will seek from the program. But he said a more detailed budget will be presented to the Senate on Monday.

However, Mouton said, it's likely the Senate won't approve the full $3 million for spending between now and the end of the fiscal year — June 30.

Mouton said the senators probably are most concerned about the source of the money — the governor's public works fund, which is spent at his discretion for local construction projects, usually at the request of legislators.

Treen had originally wanted to raise liquor fees to raise the money, but the House wouldn't approve that method of financing.

Treen is willing to give up $3 million from the public works fund this year to get the DWI enforcement off the ground, but Mouton said some legislators may be wary of the loss.

"The public works fund is sacred to many legislators," Mouton said. "This is what they use to get their drainage projects. This is their re-election money and they don't want to be deprived of it."

"What about money we might need for the flooding?" asked Sen. B.B. "Sixty" Rayburn, D-Bogalusa, referring to heavy rains around Christmas that caused severe flooding and millions of dollars in damage throughout Louisiana.

"I'd hate to think that I let some man with children lose his livelihood and let his possessions float away and I didn't do anything — just so we could put some drunk in jail," Rayburn said.

Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset, questioned whether the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, which would distribute the money, would be able to spend much of it before the regular legislative session — and the regular budget process — begins in April.

The commission still has to establish rules for DWI grants and hold public meetings before the money could be spent, Brinkhaus said.

Sen. Kelly questioned whether new jail space — one of the major justifications for the money — could be built before the regular session even if money could be allotted to parishes for construction.