



Unfinished business

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Largely unresolved. If there's a better way to describe this year's regular session of the Louisiana Legislature, the pundits and columnists and good government groups haven't found one yet. The environmental and economic tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico teamed up with the state's unprecedented budget shortfall to create a policy assembly that was short on answers and long on drama.

In fact, the session ended on June 21 with many lawmakers mumbling about the need for a special session, possibly this fall or winter. If nothing else, the Joint Legislative Budget Committee will be extremely busy in coming weeks, even more so than usual, as it continues to meet regularly to manage the state's unstable budget in the Legislature's absence.

But the 2011 regular session will loom over everything like a dark cloud. Here's a look at some of the political leftovers that will undoubtedly still be on the table next year for the Louisiana Legislature:

Budget

The fiscal year that ended in June suffered from a \$600 million shortfall; the new budget that took hold July 1, meanwhile, contained a pesky \$1 billion gap; and there's another \$2 billion deficit that's forecasted for the 2011-2012 fiscal year. For months, state officials have been referring to the latter figure as "the cliff," meaning some tough decisions were already in store for the 2011 regular session before this year's session ever convened.

But once the recent session adjourned this summer, the so-called cliff looked even worse. That's due in large part to the Legislature's decision this year to use one-time money to float the new budget, rather than cutting in preparation for the cliff.

One area of the budget lawmakers seem eager to cut from next year is the state's workforce. While about 3,000 positions have been eliminated through this year's budget, many lawmakers are still complaining that the cuts weren't substantive. For example, Sen. Jack Donahue, R-Mandeville, chairman of the Commission on Streamlining Government, says any responsible plan would include reductions at the top, where salaries are the highest.

Donahue pushed ideas from the commission to address the situation and he'll likely return next year on the same mission. "When state government has to cut, what they seem to cut is all the low positions in the state ... the people that do a lot of the work itself," he says.

Education

Louisiana's colleges and universities got off easy this year—and that's saying a lot, considering state funding to the institutions has been reduced by more than \$250 million over the past 18 months. But after this year's regular session, the tally was expected to be far worse. Instead, lawmakers pulled money from various sources to make the campuses as whole as possible.

The House and Senate, though, did begin preparing for the reductions that will be needed next year—and higher ed officials didn't make it easy for them, according to Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council. "Lawmakers complained loudly about what they characterized as a lack of information from university officials over specific cuts that will have to be made in light of the budget crisis," Brandt says.

If anything, it's a tense sign of things to come.

Infrastructure

On the western side of the 10/12 corridor, there's a load of infrastructure-related policy work pending. For example, the Acadiana Delegation entered the 2009 regular session with the hopes of creating the Energy Corridor Commission, which would have been basically a revamped version of the existing Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway Commission with additional membership. At the time, the Lafayette delegation proposed to pull in stakeholders from as far away as the central coastline and have them consider funding opportunities like tolls. But lawmakers balked.

Back for another bite at the apple this year was Rep. Jack Montoucet, D-Crowley. He wanted to change the name of the existing commission to the Regional Expressway Commission. This updated proposal would have partnered the parishes of Iberia and Lafayette behind the push for I-49. But again, it failed—due this time to a long line of lawmakers who wanted to amend the bill during the session's final days to create their own groups, like the Amite River Expressway Commission. Still, the I-49 corridor remains a priority for the region and will continue to be a priority in 2011.

Further down the line, Sen. Dan "Blade" Morrish, R-Jennings, passed legislation creating the Chenier Plain Coastal Restoration and Protection Authority. The new levee district will cover the parishes of Acadia, Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson Davis and Vermilion. That corner of the state has traditionally been overlooked when it comes to coastal protections, but that's going to change beginning with the 2011 session.

Morrish says creating the new levee district is just the first step. "Southwest Louisiana has traditionally never gotten a whole lot of coastal restoration money," he says. "And one reason for that is we never had levee districts in southwest Louisiana to maintain projects that come from the feds."

Right-to-know

Access to public records became a big deal in the middle of the 10/12 corridor this year, particularly for *The Advocate*, whose editors lobbied against legislation that would have allowed the public notices to be published online—saving taxpayer money, but eliminating newspaper revenues—and worked in favor of another bill to open up more records in the Governor's Office. Both measures failed, but it's safe to say both topics have officially become perennial issues, meaning they'll be back from more in 2011.

Commercial seafood

Get this: the recently wrapped regular session was supposed to be a landmark, game-changing policy gathering for commercial shrimp harvesters and processors located on the southern end of the 10/12 corridor. Following months of low dockside prices, Gov. Bobby Jindal got behind bills to create an official Louisiana Shrimp Task Force in law and annually fund a special seafood marketing and inspection program to the tune of \$800,000.

But rather than celebrating, shrimpers were forced to watch their industry be chipped slowly away by pollutants in the Gulf of Mexico. The governor argues it's all the more reason for the Legislature to stay involved this year and next. "In light of the threat that the BP oil spill poses to our seafood industry," Jindal says, "these acts will become even more important to bolster Louisiana's seafood industry and help to uphold the high quality of our state's seafood."

Health care

Brandt says the LSU charity hospital system now finds itself at the mercy of several factors that could affect the sustainability of operations for some of its 10/12 corridor facilities. Federal health care reform mandates, overall state revenue shortfalls and federal revenue reductions in Medicaid cost sharing will all have a significant impact on the state-run system.

Although most of the cuts doled out this year to the system were eventually restored, Brandt adds that the factors threatening to impact charity hospitals are still there. "The issue remains unresolved because future years will bring more severe budgetary challenges for state public hospitals," he says.

Politics

To put it mildly, the recent regular session was a barnburner that pitted industry against education, state officials against local officials and, yes, even legislative leaders against themselves. The biggest, most visible fight of the 2010 regular session saw House Speaker Jim Tucker in one corner and Senate President Joel Chaisson in the other.

The showdown also highlighted the top legal issue of the session, which will probably undergo even more debate in 2011. Chaisson, D-Destrehan, wanted to allow the attorney general to hire private attorneys on a contingency basis to take on BP. More or less, Tucker, R-Algiers, blocked the effort, and won favor with business and industry, whose lobbyists were opposed to the concept.

Now, a month detached from the regular session, one thing still resonates about the brawl—a Legislature divided is not the ideal way to begin the 2011 regular session, when the cliff is expected to show itself. Mix in all the political leftovers from this year's session and sprinkle

on the always-heated redistricting process that begins in January and you have the perfect recipe for a disaster, unless a more civil tone is reached. Soon.

Maybe it's possible for a reconciliation—a new birth of sorts. After all, the 2011 regular session is scheduled to convene on April 25, the day following Easter Sunday.