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Citizens, business leaders push for legislative action, win

BY MELINDA DESLATE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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BATON ROUGE — Louisiana's citizens and business leaders are taking to the halls of the state Capitol, urging change since Hurricane Katrina — pushing legislative agendas that are gaining traction, with at least two proposals on the new governor's agenda in the coming months.

Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal is backing a \$450 million transportation spending plan that started as a press from local government officials and business leaders. Jindal's hallmark campaign issue of ethics reform — which will be the sole subject of the new governor's first special session — was pushed first by a coalition of local chambers of commerce and nonpartisan groups.

These non-governmental groups got involved in fall election campaigns, and they are staying involved, helping to craft potential bills and continuing to press further issues on the horizon.

"I think the increased level of citizen activism has been one of the most positive things that emerged from the devastation of the hurricanes," said Jim Brandt, president of the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council.

Citizens and business leaders from the New Orleans area successfully advocated for the consolidation of Louisiana's fractured system of levee districts — with a group of women from New Orleans wearing red and stalking the halls of the state Capitol, lobbying for merged boards.

They also succeeded in shrinking the size of New Orleans elected government after years of opposition to such ideas in the Legislature.

"It was very encouraging to see so many citizen and business leaders who were willing to get involved in politics and push for change," Brandt said in an e-mail. "Hopefully, it is a movement that is here to stay and will not fade away as the recovery progresses."

Outside pushes for change — this time mainly from business leaders and industry groups — appear headed for big gains again in the next round of legislative sessions as well, gaining some support for their ideas from Jindal, a Republican who takes office Jan. 14.

First up for the new administration is ethics reform — an issue forced to the forefront by a group of 50 business and civic organizations, including an array of chambers of commerce from around Louisiana, calling itself LA Ethics 1.

The group got several ethics law changes through the Legislature but failed to get approval for its centerpiece: disclosure of lawmakers' sources of income.

But the financial disclosure bill served as a hallmark proposal in Jindal's gubernatorial campaign, and it will be back as one of the focal points of his ethics

agenda, with the backing of another advocacy group called Blueprint Louisiana.

Blueprint Louisiana was started by a group of business leaders pushing positions on ethics, health care, education, transportation and workforce training. They invested money in the fall elections and got 82 percent of the incoming senators and 70 percent of incoming House members to publicly sign their agenda.

That agenda includes new lobbyist regulations, more money for ethics regulation, better coordination between industry leaders and work force training programs, and new dollars for transportation projects around Louisiana — many of them ideas embraced by Jindal.

Among the biggest-ticket proposals coming from outside the Capitol is a \$450 million transportation funding plan embraced by Blueprint Louisiana and heavily pushed by Driving Louisiana Forward, a coalition of chambers of commerce and construction and engineering firms.

The proposal would redirect state sales tax and registration fees on vehicles to road and bridge construction and port improvements and forbid the transportation department to use road money for retirement and health care.

Driving Louisiana Forward failed to get the bill approved during the last regular legislative session because of opposition from Democratic Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who said it would steer money away from the state general fund and could force cuts to colleges and health care services in tight budget years.

But Jindal's on board with the idea, giving it the boost it may need for passage — and leaving questions about which idea may be next for a groundswell of outside support to force it into debate at the state Capitol.

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