

Session's report card depends on who's grading

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By John Hill

jhillbr@gannett.com

and Mike Hasten

mhasten@gannett.com

BATON ROUGE -- Gov. Kathleen Blanco gives herself an "A" for the just-ended legislative session, but the presidents of two of Louisiana's major non-profit think tanks say it's more like a "C."

"We actually achieved a great deal this session," Blanco said. "Give us an 'A' on substantive content of many bills that were passed. I believe it was a very successful session."

While Blanco lost her cigarette tax even after dedicating it to a \$3,350 teacher pay raise package and could not control legislative spending, she was able to get through some smaller, less publicized changes to economic development laws that could pay off in selling the state.

But her overall agenda was limited in the first place, said Public Affairs Research Council president Jim Brandt.

"There just wasn't that much," Brandt said.

Council for A Better Louisiana President Barry Erwin said Blanco was successful in coming up with a budget that did not cut health care services to the nearly 2 million Louisianans, maintaining higher education and expanding economic inducements.

"But it was a difficult session for her on some of her biggest issues. She was unsuccessful in passing the cigarette tax. She was not able to keep the Legislature in line with how they spend the surplus revenue, which sets them up for even more problems next year," Erwin said. "Overall, I'd give the session a C."

On PAR's list of good things about the session, most of them were things that failed in the Legislature: an attempt to raid or reduce the Rainy Day savings account mandated in the Constitution, the move to undo the income tax changes made by the Stelly plan adopted in 2002, and efforts to change the Louisiana Education Accountability Program, for example.

Erwin said he found it disturbing that legislators even proposed to chip away at some of those reforms, such as the attempt to interfere with the Louisiana Community and Technical College System by peeling out technical schools.

Both PAR and CABL were unhappy that ethics reforms died. The Legislature refused to even consider requiring lawmakers to disclose their sources of income and a House committee killed the bill that would have prohibited legislators from accepting free tickets to sporting and cultural events, including golf games, from lobbyists.

On PAR's session report card, most of the items listed as good moves were things the Legislature did not do.

"When you back out all the local bills and the routine things, there wasn't much that made it through the process," Brandt said. "It was an unusual session in that so much of what they did was to do no harm."

"There were some minor steps in the right direction," Brandt said, mentioning the first step towards indigent defense reform and a new state employees retirement plan that will require future workers to stay on the job until 60 and require them to pay in more.

The limit on film tax credits to money spent within the state, the new tax credit program to encourage the music recording industry and the I-49 funding mechanism bill were all good moves, Brandt said.

"When you get beyond those, there really wasn't much that was good for the state," Brandt said.

Erwin said a major positive "is we did not cut health care or higher education and we didn't threaten any critical services; they are all still there."

Some of the positive steps in economic development "didn't get a lot of attention but they will be good for the state's efforts to go out and attract jobs," Erwin said.

The Louisiana Federation of Teachers, which represents 21,000 of Louisiana's 59,000 k-12 educators, announced Friday that Louisiana had slipped from 45th to 46th in a new national ranking. "Two years ago, we ranked 43rd," said Steve Monaghan, LFT president.

"There is a terrible disconnect between what is actually happening in the classroom and the way our Legislature treats educators," Monaghan said.

The \$530 minimum raise legislators came up with "verges on insulting," he said.