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Spending bills filled with lawmakers' local projects

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A hot air balloon championship. Fishing tournaments. A jazz orchestra in New Orleans. The zoo in Alexandria. And a golf course in St. Mary Parish hoping to equip its golf carts with a global positioning satellite system.

Each would benefit from the state's brightened money picture in three spending bills for the current and next fiscal years, under proposals approved by a House budget committee that chose to add millions of dollars in local, pet projects for lawmakers.

With a new \$360 million to spend this year and the next, the House Appropriations Committee chose to spend at least \$24 million on dozens of so-called "member amendments," individual lawmakers' requests for small projects back home — parks, museums and roads, favored organizations, sports and arts complexes and local councils on aging.

"They got the smallest shot," said Rep. John Alario, chairman of the appropriations committee, describing individual legislators' suggestions on how to use the state's new cash.

Jim Brandt, president of the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, said the projects should be local responsibilities rather than paid for by the state.

"And this is before it even hits the Senate, where it is quite likely many more millions in 'member amendments' will be added. Obviously, we think there is more belt-tightening that needs to be done," Brandt said.

It's unclear if the additions will harm Gov. Kathleen Blanco's attempts to raise cigarette taxes for pay raises for teachers, school support workers and college professors. Blanco is arguing the state doesn't have enough recurring cash to pay for the raises within its existing budget.

Brandt said the local projects littering the three spending bills don't help Blanco's pitch.

"It certainly doesn't indicate or show that the state is in dire fiscal straits if in fact we have a lot of these luxury items in the budget. As long as there's pork remaining, it's difficult to push any sort of tax increase," he said.

Arguing the projects are important cultural, infrastructure or economic development needs back home, lawmakers in both the House and Senate each year slide their local items into the budget bill, but the budget for next year looked tight — until a surge in oil and gas prices that is bumping up the corporate tax collections helped improve the state's finances.

The Revenue Estimating Conference — which determines how much state general fund cash the state is expected to bring in each year and how much lawmakers can spend — raised its

forecast for the current fiscal year by \$192 million and for the next fiscal year by nearly \$169 million.

That gave the appropriations committee much more money to propose spending over the two years, most of which they plugged Tuesday into health care programs for the poor, education needs and retirement debt payment. But the committee also chose to propose spending the dollars on local projects: a baseball and track complex in Natchitoches, a farming program, festivals celebrating Christmas and rice and the Jefferson Parish Sports and Scholastic Foundation.

And though Blanco originally proposed cutting in half the \$16 million in grant funds doled out at the governor's discretion that have been derided as "slush funds," the committee added dollars back to the funds to continue them next year at the same dollar amount as this year.

The spending bills are expected to come up for debate on the House floor Thursday.

Rep. Bryant Hammett, D-Ferriday, who is handling the governor's cigarette tax bill, said he doesn't think the \$24 million in local projects will sway more people to vote against the tax bill. He said lawmakers understand that there are lots of projects that are important to local constituencies and are needed back home.

However, Hammett said the proposed spending will give opponents of the cigarette tax more to scream about on the House floor, where the tax bill awaits a vote.

"It's just more fodder for the folks who are against it, who are going to rise to argue," he said.

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The bills are filed as House Bill 1, 2 and 842 and can be found at www.legis.state.la.us