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Parish TV ad deal is panned Only 2 members of council support it

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By Michelle Krupa
West Bank bureau

After paying \$38,000 for newspaper ads detailing Jefferson Parish's response to Hurricane Katrina, the Parish Council is set to consider spending another \$100,000 today for television commercials addressing residents' concerns and the council's "message of hope" for the future.

In a proposed deal with WWL-TV, the parish would spend public dollars earmarked for economic development to finance a "public awareness campaign" with "the positive message that Jefferson Parish will remain vigilant in its efforts to create opportunities in the region," according to the resolution on today's meeting agenda.

But the proposal as drafted by Parish President Aaron Broussard's administration appeared to have weak backing from the council Tuesday. Just two of seven members said they could support it in its current form. Broussard's top aide also said that a change in the commercials' focus might precede today's vote.

As written, the plan provides for production and a four-week broadcast schedule of eight one-minute segments, each featuring one council member or Broussard, plus a separate 15- to 30-minute video to run on the parish's cable station, which also would show the short ads.

Focus on businesses

Councilmen Chris Roberts and Byron Lee said they intended to support the measure as written, though both added that they would use their 60-second segments not to detail their experiences during the storms, as dictated in the draft contract, but to highlight local businesses seeking employees and customers.

"We're going to highlight the fact that we are up and running and we have space and (are) trying to encourage business to consider Jefferson Parish as an option," Roberts said, adding that such ads by out-of-state mayors trying to entice Louisianians have aired recently on local radio.

Lee said the investment could return to Jefferson Parish "hundredfold" if ads encourage local entrepreneurs to rebuild at home, adding that the spots would not aim to promote council members or Broussard, all of whom may seek re-election in 2007.

"My purpose for supporting this is that I'm not going to be promoting me," Lee said. "When I spend money for my campaign, it was about me. But this message is about Jefferson Parish. I don't have any heartburn about it because I'm not going to be promoting myself."

Councilman Louis Congemi, however, said Jefferson has spent enough money explaining its hurricane-related choices, adding that he plans to tap his campaign account to finance a letter describing to constituents future plans for the district.

"I just don't think that we need to spend any more parish money at this point to produce or inform the public of what went right and what went wrong," he said. "I think for the most part everyone already knows that, and I think that the parish president has been on television and has expressed feelings of hope and has already explained how we plan to correct things."

Last-minute rewrite?

Broussard's top aide, Tim Whitmer, said that before today's vote the measure might be altered to focus on economic reconstruction rather than politicians' views of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Three council members, Chairman Tom Capella, John Young and Jennifer Sneed, said they could endorse a partial parish subsidy for ads highlighting clusters of Jefferson businesses, such as banks or malls, that have reopened since the storms -- if businesses also paid for a portion of the costs.

"If we're trying to say, Jefferson Parish is the nucleus for the metro region. Come shop here for Christmas. Come eat here. If we can generate sales tax, I'm all for that," Sneed said. "But it should have absolutely nothing to do with the parish president or a politician on TV talking about, 'Jefferson Parish is a great place.' "

Councilman Elton Lagasse could not be reached for comment.

The television proposal follows the expenditure this month of \$38,000 for four full-page ads in The Times-Picayune, explaining officials' decisions surrounding Katrina, including the controversial evacuation of pump operators before the storm. The ads also laid out priorities for future hurricane protection.

Observers from two government watchdog groups said that in light of hurricane damage to public infrastructure, local governments should not spend money on advertising.

"One hundred thousand dollars sounds like a lot of money that could be better used at this particular juncture than on feel-good ads," said Beth Daley, a spokeswoman for the Project for Government Oversight in Washington, D.C. "The fact that they're putting themselves in these ads is very transparent, very political."

Even ads designed to boost tax revenue probably should not be a top priority so soon after the storms, said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council in Baton Rouge.

"There are a lot higher priorities in Jefferson Parish than this sort of infomercial at this point, and I'm very surprised they're even considering using public funds for this purpose," he said. "They have so much access to get that message out without paying for ads. It seems as though it was more in the line of political strategy."

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Michelle Krupa can be reached at mkrupa@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3785.