



Two-thirds of lawmakers' pet projects still funded

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — While Gov. Bobby Jindal enraged lawmakers by stripping millions of dollars from their favored projects in this year's budget, he only struck at less than a third of the add-ons crammed into the state's spending plans.

Jindal cut \$16 million in legislative projects in the \$29.9 billion budget — out of at least \$55 million in earmarks that lawmakers included.

That leaves an array of local senior centers, museums and festivals still in line to receive taxpayer funding, while some playgrounds, museums and organizations lost out. And some towns are getting money from the state with no explanation at all as to how it will be spent.

"With no scoring mechanism or uniform evaluation procedure for each local project granted funding, the public is left to wonder why those were left in the budget to compete with statewide needs for state tax dollars," the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana said in a statement.

Lawmakers complained that not only did Jindal cut what they considered to be worthy projects that provide important services to their districts, but also that they didn't believe the governor was consistent in his cuts.

"This was not the right way to go about doing this," Sen. Mike Michot, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said after the line-item vetoes were announced this week.

Jindal cut \$250,000 for the Knock Knock Children's Museum of Baton Rouge but left \$6,500 for the Cotton Museum and \$110,000 for the Civil Rights Museum. He removed an earmark for a balloon festival in Baton Rouge, but \$50,000 remained for the Christmas Festival in Natchitoches.

The towns of Gibsland, Homer, Haynesville and Junction City each are getting \$10,000 without any description of the spending while other towns lost the money they were slated to receive.

When he announced the vetoes, Jindal described the projects that he removed as spending the state couldn't afford. He said he was ensuring tax dollars were wisely spent and invested in the state's priorities.

Questioned Wednesday about lawmakers' complaints, Jindal's top budget adviser, Commissioner of Administration Angele Davis, said: "There's a lot of questions about discrepancy. Maybe we should veto more next time."

Each year, lawmakers add millions in "member amendments" to the budget. Jindal warned lawmakers during the legislative session that he would veto dollars for non-governmental organizations that didn't meet certain criteria.

He issued a letter saying that each project must have regional impact, be a state agency priority and have been openly discussed during the legislative session. Proper disclosure forms about the organizations must also have been filed with the House and Senate.

"We were very unambiguous about the criteria we were going to use, what we were going to veto and what we were not going to veto," Jindal said.

But other items — besides nongovernment organization funding — were removed from the budget as well, and lawmakers said it was never clear that those types of projects would be stripped, including dollars for local government agencies.

Sen. John Alario, D-Westwego, said he understood the rules for non-governmental agencies, but didn't understand why \$330,000 he added to the budget for two parish playgrounds funded through government agencies were cut.

"At no time did they talk about not funding programs through government agencies," he said. "They changed the rules in the middle of the game."

Jindal said he used a "common sense" approach for the local government add-ons, prioritizing infrastructure needs such as road repairs and sewage systems, over ballparks and playgrounds.

In combing through the earmarks, Davis said museums with significant regional impacts or overseen by state agencies were funded, while small, local museums weren't. She said the governor's office was "pretty lenient" with dollars appropriated to local government agencies because those agencies are audited and must account for their spending.

"We tried to be very fair and consistent," she said.

Sen. Eric LaFleur saw his \$800,000 add-on for a multipurpose baseball and recreational center for Evangeline Parish stripped out, while a \$250,000 proposal for Pontiff Playground in Jefferson Parish wasn't touched.

LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, said his project would have provided a recreational area for a multiparish, rural region that doesn't have many outlets for children and families. He said the

Jindal administration should have outlined the criteria it was using to veto local projects before removing them from the budget.

PAR took a different view, applauding Jindal's budget vetoes as a good first step and saying the governor should veto every local earmark from the state's spending plans next time. In its place, PAR suggested a revolving loan and grant fund that would provide dollars for projects that apply and require evaluations of the projects that receive money.