

## **Caddo, Bossier delegates spend \$45,000 on D.C. Mardi Gras**

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Local taxpayers footed the bill for at least \$45,000 in expenses — including a posh hospitality suite for partygoers — to send Caddo and Bossier parish delegates to Washington Mardi Gras 2010.

That total doesn't include the tab for a private dinner party for 75 guests, mostly from Louisiana, at an Italian chain restaurant. Also missing are meals, cab fare and other expenses incurred by the nine officials the Bossier Parish Police Jury sent to the annual gala in the nation's capital.

Those and other findings related to Washington Mardi Gras reveal discretionary spending at a time when local governments find themselves cutting services and laying off workers to trim beleaguered budgets. Spending taxpayer money to attend a party — touted by some as a networking opportunity to showcase Louisiana to the country — may be all the more doubtful given that both Caddo and Bossier parishes employ a federal lobbyist to speak with Capitol Hill lawmakers and others on their behalf.

"This is a really good example of why governments should be open and all spending be transparent," said Jennifer Pike of the Baton Rouge-based watchdog agency Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana. "It's important the public is able to monitor what their public and elected officials think are appropriate government expenses — then they can make appropriate future decisions based on those (spending) decisions."

Caddo and Bossier officials defended the spending, saying it was necessary to keep north Louisiana front of mind with Washington politicians.

"I understand that some people want to believe that all government and the elected officials are crooks, but this simply is not true," Bossier Police Jury President Wanda Bennett said. "The celebration of Mardi Gras is a special celebration in Washington that was established many years ago to share the culture and food of our state with everyone and to give them an opportunity they may otherwise never have. A lot of hard work is done during this time along with the celebration."

Schmoozing with Louisiana congressmen John Fleming and Rodney Alexander as well as with U.S. senators David Vitter and Mary Landrieu proved invaluable, said Caddo Commissioner Matthew Linn.

"The contact time in their office and at the dinner table is priceless," Linn said. "Out of sight out of mind comes into play, and these yearly meetings along with administrative follow ups keep Caddo and Bossier on the Louisiana state map."

The Times surveyed local government agencies and officials to determine which sent representatives to Washington Mardi Gras. Of those that did, the newspaper filed public records requests asking for a listing of expenses. The newspaper's survey showed that at least four local agencies — Shreveport, Caddo Parish Commission, Bossier Parish Police Jury and the Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments — went to Washington.

Among the newspaper's findings:

- Bossier Parish Police Jury topped the list of spenders with some \$22,809.56 in expenses — outspending any other local government agency by nearly \$8,500. The police jury was followed by Caddo with an estimated \$14,373. Shreveport spent \$4,606.40 and Council of Governments costs totaled \$4,173.78.
- The police jury also sent at least nine people, including its engineer, attorney and the Cyber Innovation Center executive director. Caddo, Shreveport and NCLOG sent four, two and one, respectively.
- Caddo and Bossier parishes spent at least \$8,500 to host a hospitality suite.
- The guest list for a private dinner party jointly hosted by Caddo and Bossier almost exclusively was comprised of north Louisiana-area officials, residents and business people.

The total amount local officials spent, is an estimate. That's because while other local government agencies, such as Shreveport, already have reconciled their expenses for the Jan. 21-23 event, Caddo and Bossier officials said final costs were not available.

"When all of the trip expenses have been filed, we will forward you the information that you request," wrote Caddo Parish administrator Woody Wilson in a Feb. 2 e-mail responding to The Times' public records request.

It took repeated requests by the newspaper to get Wilson and Bossier Parish administrator Bill Altimus to offer an estimate of expenses that omitted a Jan. 21 dinner party. When asked about the soirée, Wilson and Altimus conceded the event happened but again said the costs weren't available.

Both said an accounting of their respective agency's expenses would be forwarded after final costs were reconciled. Neither could say when that would happen.

"As these bills or request(s) for reimbursement come in, I will forward the same to you," wrote Altimus in a Feb. 4 e-mail.

Pike said paying for office holiday or birthday parties with public funds usually is prohibited but that guidelines for appropriate government expenditures allow for some discretionary spending. Even so, Caddo's and Bossier's dinner party seemed inappropriate, she said.

"It's a surprise to me that an official would think that it's okay to throw what is essentially a birthday party in Washington, D.C., for people that the official could meet with in the state," Pike said.

Shreveport Mayor Cedric Glover minimized taxpayer costs for his trip by combining Mardi Gras with an annual U.S. Conference of Mayors gathering. Additionally, city funds were not used to buy Mardi Gras dinner and ball tickets for Shreveport's delegation. The city does not employ a federal lobbyist.

"It is clearly a benefit to the city of Shreveport for its mayor, council members and appointed leaders to be able to meet with the president of the United States as well as members of Congress," Glover said.