

PAR, CABL assess session activity

By Mike Hasten . mhasten@gannett.com . March 28, 2010

BATON ROUGE - The heads of Louisiana's two major government watchdog groups say the state's budget problems are shaping the Legislature's actions this year and could drive significant changes in several area of public policy.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, and Barry Erwin, president and CEO of Council for a Better Louisiana, said the budget shortfall affects every service provided by the state, so lawmakers are being forced to take steps that they otherwise might not.

"It's the major focus on all levels," Erwin said, and especially has caused lawmakers to look closely at education, from Pre-K to college.

"There's probably more substantial education legislation than we've seen in a long time."

The budget crisis has forced "major debate about the future of higher education," he said. "There will be big debate on how to govern universities and whether the Legislature will give up control of tuition."

"Higher education has a whole range of issues," Brandt said, including whether management boards for the University of Louisiana, Southern University and Louisiana State University campuses should be eliminated. Legislation would create a single board of higher education but retain a separate board for managing community colleges that would report to the overall board.

If that fails, there's separate legislation that would give the Board of Regents more authority. Lawmakers have complained that under the existing setup, the Board of Regents has little recourse if the management boards don't comply with the supervisory board's orders.

"There's a tuition and fee opportunity, whether the Legislature maintains control of tuition or goes along with the governor's plan to surrender that authority" in exchange for higher performance, Brandt said.

The Jindal administration's Grad Act, colleges and universities that prove they have raised retention and graduation rates could impose increases up to 10 percent per year until they reach the average among their peer universities in the south. Louisiana is currently one of the lowest tuition states.

An unrelated occurrence - the Department of Public Safety hiking driver's license fees - could have an adverse effect on campuses being able to raise tuition.

"That was inopportune timing and clouds the debate on the issue," Erwin said.

Brandt said he expects the license hike to play a negative role in the debate over surrendering tuition control because of "the public outrage about it.

Overall, the budget shortfall provides the opportunity to make changes that otherwise might not be made, Brandt said. In effect, the cutbacks are "restructuring higher education to deal with \$500 million in stimulus money that will be missing next year."

Erwin said CABL supports the move because higher education already was cut \$250 million this year and is facing another \$80 million cut before the end of this fiscal year June 30.

The proposed tuition increase would bring in about \$60 million, which he said is "not even close" to making up for the cuts.

In lower education, the governor is pushing his "Red Tape Reduction Act," which would give school boards authority to exempt schools or entire school districts from some of the bureaucratic red tape and allow them to function like charter schools, provided they show improvements in low-performing schools.

Erwin said that like the higher education bills, this gives schools authority to do something they want, "in exchange for doing something else."

Brandt said to watch for "a number of second-tier issues" that are likely to capture plenty of attention. Included are:

- the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education vs. the Legislature over funding public education. BESE submitted a funding formula that's \$12 million more than the administration said was available and some lawmakers say BESE or the formula should be abolished.
- the fight over whether to eliminate the offices of the lieutenant governor, secretary of state or treasurer.
- making it easier to tap the state's Rainy Day Fund, especially if federal funding decreases.
- setting term limits for state and local officials, especially school boards.
- trying to repeal a recent increase in driver's license fees.
- trying to outlaw red light cameras.

Erwin said CABL again is supporting changes in school boards, but not as strong as last year's bills.