

THE LENS

Landrieu's group studying jail meets in private; no plans to take comments from public

Thursday, July 22nd, 2010 | Posted by [Karen Gadbois](#)

A mayoral advisory group examining the controversial planned expansion of the Orleans Parish Prison apparently held its first meeting recently, but Mayor Mitch Landrieu's administration said the group is meeting privately and is not open to public input.

"The public process will take place at City Council when they hear the recommendations," of the group, said Devona Dolliole, Landrieu's communications director. (*Note: Earlier versions of this story incorrectly quoted Dolliole referring to a "working group."*)

However, the state open-meetings law applies to advisory boards.

Public officials are often under the "mistaken impression if they just meet to talk about an issue and not actually take action they can meet privately," said Jennifer Pike of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana.

Additionally, she said, "an important aspect" of the public meeting laws is that "minutes are taken and made available at some point."

Thursday evening, Dolliole referred to the July 9 gathering as a group of "stakeholders," insisting they're not subject to the open-meetings law.

Landrieu formed the advisory group after public outcry over Sheriff Marlin Gusman's plan to expand the jail from about 3,800 beds to about 5,800 beds.

It's unclear whether the mayor has much control over the process, other than speaking from his bully pulpit. Gusman has the money for the building project using a combination of FEMA money and bond money issued after voters approved a jail-building referendum by a 3-to-1 margin in 2008.

The City Council, however, needs to give final approval to a zoning measure before Gusman can proceed, and members [said at their July 1](#) meeting that they're waiting for the advisory group to make recommendations, particularly on the size of the prison.

In advance of the meeting, a number of organizations expressed concerns over the size and cost of the facility. The American Civil Liberties Union questioned the expansion in the face of budget cuts and deficits, as well as "making the city of New Orleans potentially home to the largest per capita jail in the world."

Council members were told that Landrieu's office formed a working group to address the concerns and to make recommendations to the council as it moves to approve the final phases of the zoning requests.

The group met last week with Deputy Mayor Andy Kopplin taking the lead on the issue, and additional meetings are taking place with "various stakeholders to collect data," Dolliole said.

Kopplin will continue to meet to "review information to make informed recommendations to Mayor Landrieu" over the next few weeks, she said.

Dolliole said the following people were at the meeting:

Kopplin

Gusman

Budget Director Cedric Grant

City Attorney Nannette Jolivet-Brown

Police Superintendent Ronal Serpas

Councilwoman Stacy Head

Councilwoman Susan Guidry

Councilwoman Jacquelyn Clarkson

Jackie Cole, Clarkson aide

Deborah Langhoff, Guidry aide

Amy Chandler, Guidry aide

District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro

Michael Cowan, Common Good

Rafael Goyeneche, Metropolitan Crime Commission

Allen James, Safe Streets/Strong Communities

Municipal Court Judge Paul Sens

Criminal Court Judge Terry Alarcon