

# The Times-Picayune

## **EDITORIAL: The rules of lawmaking**

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Gov. Bobby Jindal touts the \$16.1 million in legislators' pet projects that he struck from the state budget last week as a move toward efficiency and fiscal responsibility.

Lawmakers aggravated that money for their districts was axed see the vetoes as another example of the Jindal administration's poor communication skills.

Both sides are partly right.

The governor's attempt to scrub the budget of questionable spending is a worthy move. Budget earmarks for private groups whose only qualification is their connection to a lawmaker aren't a wise way to spend the state's tax dollars. Neither is a neighborhood playground or community center, which ought to be built with local revenues.

For too long lawmakers have made a habit of handing out state tax dollars to those sorts of groups and projects to curry favor back home -- and previous governors have essentially let them do it.

Gov. Jindal warned lawmakers in late April that funding for non-governmental organizations would have to meet certain criteria. But he gave them no inkling that grants to local governments for playgrounds, recreation centers and the like were off limits, then cut some of those items as well.

"I think they've gone farther than what the ground rules were. If you're playing a game, you ought to play by the rules," said Westwego Sen. John Alario, who has been a lawmaker for 36 years and served under six governors.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jim Fannin of Jonesboro agreed. "I think they owe it to the membership . . . to make sure there's a clear understanding."

They're right. Staying silent while the Legislature makes spending and other decisions and then vetoing them with no warning and little explanation isn't the way to show leadership. And, quite simply, it isn't fair. Not only does it waste lawmakers' time and effort, it leaves them and their constituents hanging. The arts programs and community centers that were counting on getting help from the state now have to scramble to find money elsewhere.

Gov. Jindal is right to suggest that state tax dollars should be used to achieve statewide or regional priorities. Spreading money around to small local projects dilutes the impact it might have if applied to something that would benefit more people. Some lawmakers might argue that the money they direct to groups and projects in their districts is a tiny piece of the \$29.7 billion state budget. But \$16 million is a sizable chunk of money that could be used to provide health care or pre-K classes, for example, for hundreds of children.

Multiply that amount by a four-year term, and it really starts to add up. Besides, increased spending on health care and some other services brings in extra federal money -- which further enhances services.

As the Public Affairs Research Council pointed out, however, it is impossible to judge how evenhandedly Gov. Jindal used his line-item veto. Although he cut \$16 million, he left \$39 million in local earmarks intact. Without a scoring mechanism or uniform standards, PAR said, the public "is left to wonder why those were left in the budget to compete with statewide needs for state tax dollars."

That is true, and Gov. Jindal should spell out in detail going forward what the criteria will be to get state funding.

In this round of vetoes, for instance, he cut \$125,000 for the Greater New Orleans Biosciences Economic Development District even though it is a university-business partnership that clearly will have a regional impact on health care and the economy. The district was created by the Legislature, so its purpose has already been sanctioned by the state.

On the other hand, he left a \$550,000 earmark in the budget for the District 2 Community Enhancement Corp., which is a pet project of Sen. Ann Duplessis, who championed the governor's voucher bill. Administration officials say that the appropriation was left in the budget because the district it covers was especially hard-hit by Katrina.

But the same could be said of the medical community, particularly the downtown corridor where the biosciences district lies.

Gov. Jindal has an ambitious agenda, and he will need lawmakers and the public behind him to achieve it. Sending mixed signals, as he did with some of these vetoes and the Legislature's attempted pay raise, hurts his credibility.

This administration has great potential, but clear and open communication is essential to effective leadership. And the governor and his staff have some work to do in that regard.