

The LRHA Policy Corner

April 24, 2006

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA:

- An updated LRHA Legislative Agenda can be found at www.lrha.org – under legislative updates.

STATE & LOCAL ACTION:

**Legislative Briefs From The State Legislature*

- House panel supports motorcycle restriction
 - Infants and children up to 8 years old shouldn't ride on motorcycles, a divided House committee decided last week.
 - Rep. Damon Baldone, D-Houma, initially sought to prohibit children up to 5 years of age from being passengers on motorcycles - the House Transportation Committee raised the age.
 - The bill would not ban children from riding in side cars to motorcycles or from participating in recreational motorcycle activities on closed tracks.
 - The committee sent the bill to the full House with an 8-3 vote.
- Noise-pollution bill withdrawn in Senate
 - Legislation to strip the state environmental agency of the responsibility for policing noise pollution has been sidelined for the 2006 legislative session.
 - Sen. Clo Fontenot, R-Livingston, withdrew the Senate-passed bill as it came up for a second time before the House Environmental Committee.
 - The Louisiana Environmental Action Network opposed the measure, Senate Bill 57, with its president, Cheryl Slavant, arguing that the agency should instead fulfill its legal responsibility.
- House would let DEQ speed up some permits
 - It took two votes, but supporters of a bill to let manufacturers speed up their permit processes with the state Department of Environmental Quality — if they're willing to pay an extra fee — rallied enough votes to get House passage.
 - A company seeking quicker action from DEQ would have to pay an added fee to cover the costs of employee overtime and contract work done on the permit.
 - Backers said House Bill 870 would boost economic development, but opponents say it would give favorable treatment to bigger businesses that could pay more for the permit - some lawmakers objected to any new fee.
 - At first, the House voted 64-29 for the bill, but it failed because it didn't have support of two-thirds of the representatives, or 70 votes.
 - An amendment was added to end the fee in 2009, and the bill passed 92-5. It goes next to the Senate.

- Senate would limit cost of some expropriations
 - The Senate endorsed a proposed constitutional amendment aimed at reducing costs for hurricane protection and flood-control projects.
 - Under Senate Bill 27, owners of expropriated property would be limited in the amount they could receive for the land under the standard set by the U.S. Constitution – private property cannot be taken for public use “without just compensation.”
 - The Senate voted 38-0 for the proposed constitutional amendment and its companion statutory change, Senate Bill 64.
 - The bill now heads to the House, where it must obtain a two-thirds vote and then on to voters.

- Legislators say rename prison after ex-senator
 - The state’s prison at Angie will soon be named after former long-time state Sen. B.B. “60” Rayburn of Bogalusa.
 - The Legislature must approve the move because it’s an exception to a Louisiana law that prevents the naming of a public buildings, bridges, parks and the like after living people.
 - The Senate approved House 533 by Rep. Harold Ritchie, D-Bogalusa, honoring its former veteran budget committee chairman who served from 1951 until 1995, when he was defeated in a re-election bid.
 - With final legislative approval, the bill goes to Gov. Kathleen Blanco’s desk for signing into law.

****Abortion Ban Clears Committee - Bill Clears First Hurdle, Heads To Senate Floor***

A bill aimed at outlawing most abortions in Louisiana cleared its first legislative hurdle Wednesday, April 19th - but it wouldn’t go into effect unless the U.S. Supreme Court overturns its 33-year-old Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion, or if the U.S. Constitution is changed to specifically allow states to stop abortions.

- Louisiana has not had an abortion law since 1992, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck it down as unconstitutional - that law attempted to outlaw abortions except to save the life of the mother or if rape or incest caused the pregnancy.

- There were 11,000 abortions in Louisiana last year and Senate Bill 33 would outlaw abortion in Louisiana with only one exception — to save the life of the mother.
 - It is patterned after a recently approved South Dakota law that is expected to be challenged all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Anti-abortion advocates hope two new justices on the high court might help overturn Roe v. Wade.
 - The bill would punish doctors who performed abortions with up to 10 years in prison and fines up to \$100,000 - women who received abortions would not be punished.
 - Gov. Kathleen Blanco would not say whether she would sign or veto the abortion bill if it passes the Legislature, but that she would have to review the bill in its final form.

- This is the first time in 15 years that Louisiana lawmakers are tackling the divisive issue and several committee members warned that their vote to send the bill to the Senate floor should not be interpreted as support for the measure.
 - One senator noted the absence of an exception for rape and incest - another advocated a total abortion ban.

****La.'s Health-Care Redesign Gets Federal Push***

- The Bush administration is interested in helping Louisiana restructure its health-care system into a national model.
 - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt, the nation's top health administrator, is coming to Baton Rouge this week to underscore the point
- As she spoke to the Rural Hospital Coalition, Governor Blanco stated that “We are going to be working together in the coming months and over the next couple of years so we can develop a health-care system that can deliver in better and more-efficient ways.”
 - The health-care system disruptions caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita provide a perfect opportunity for the revamp, Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Fred Cerise told meeting attendees.
- Among the ideas is changing the basis for Medicaid, Medicare and uncompensated-care payments from one based on “episodes of illness” to one that provides financial incentives to doctors and other providers who emphasize prevention — reducing illness, injury and disabilities.
 - A subcommittee of the Louisiana Recovery Authority is working to establish a coalition to back a redesign of Louisiana health care.
 - Blanco and Cerise updated rural hospital executives on health-care initiatives and underscored rural hospitals' role in providing care.
- During the coalition conference, rural hospital executives lobbied state and legislative policymakers for more money for the care they deliver to uninsured people.
- Executive Director Linda Welch said the 48 rural hospitals need \$15 million more than the \$68.4 million in Blanco's proposed state budget.
- The executives got pledges of support from Senate President Don Hines, D-Bunkie, a physician, and House Speaker Joe Salter, D-Florien.
 - Hines said the revenue picture might be brighter after a mid-May meeting of the Revenue Estimating Conference, when state economists will do a new analysis of revenue trends.

****Boustany Vows To Find Aid Holdup***

Congress has approved funding to help aid local government efforts to rebuild in areas such as Cameron Parish, but according to U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany unexplained delays are keeping too much of that money from reaching its destination.

- Boustany, a Lafayette Republican who represents southwestern Louisiana, visited several areas of lower Cameron Parish last week to gather information from people dealing directly with rebuilding efforts - six months after Hurricane Rita, too many people are still waiting on promised funding from the federal government.
 - The Cameron Parish school system has requested millions from the federal government for such things as building repair and replacement — only two of the parish’s six schools are operating, three are destroyed.
 - The School Board has received support from a private corporation, Cheniere Energy, which is building two large liquefied natural gas terminals in Cameron Parish.
 - Cheniere Energy put up seven temporary buildings at the school site in Hackberry, where students from Johnson Bayou High School share a gym and cafeteria with Hackberry High School students further north.
 - Cheniere also provided such things as desks, computers and supplies – and insists that Cheniere has an interest in making sure Cameron Parish gets back on its feet.
 - The company has more than \$1 billion invested in its two LNG sites — the one at the Sabine Pass west of Johnson Bayou will be the largest in the world.
- ✓ According to Boustany, “Southwest Louisiana is “bleeding,” losing population and jobs as funding issues get tied up in Washington, D.C., or Baton Rouge, I’m determined to rattle some cages.”

ON THE FEDERAL FRONT:

- The U.S. Congress will be on a District Work Period Recess until April 24, 2006 – The Senate and House are set to reconvene on April 24th and 25th @ 2:00pm.

****Portman Tapped For OMB; Hill Ties Emphasized***

On Tuesday, April 18th, President Bush nominated U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman to succeed Joshua B. Bolten as director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, in a move aimed at smoothing relations with Congress and reviving his stalled agenda of budget and tax cuts.

- At a Rose Garden ceremony, Bush talked up Portman’s service in Congress, including his stint as vice chairman of the Budget Committee and as an influential member of the Ways and Means Committee who knows how to “work across the aisle” and will consult with legislators regularly.
 - Portman will be a “powerful voice for pro-growth policies and spending restraint,” Bush said in urging swift Senate confirmation of Portman for OMB chief.

- As a six-term Ohio lawmaker prior to being confirmed for the trade post in 2005, Portman (1993-2005) served in House leadership and acted as chief liaison with the Bush White House, describing himself as the president's "eyes and ears" in the House.
 - He also served as legislative affairs director in the 1980s under President George H.W. Bush.
 - Support for Portman, 50, who remains well-liked on the Hill, began coming in soon after Bush's announcement.

****McClellan Resigns As White House Shakeup Continues***

White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan announced on April 19th that he will resign, the latest in a shuffle of top-level staff in the administration of President Bush.

- Bush did not immediately name a replacement, but Fox News reported that Tony Snow, a radio host on the network, had been approached, along with Dan Senor, former spokesman for the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq.
- The shuffle of top-level White House staff began with the resignation of Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr. last month.
 - Office of Management and Budget chief Joshua B. Bolten, who replaced Card as chief of staff, hinted of a shakeup when he met with senior White House staff Monday, telling them that if they were planning to leave now would be a good time to do it.

****Senate Democrats Push Price-Gouging Bill As Gas Prices Rise***

With oil prices climbing to record highs at more than \$70 a barrel last week, Senate Democratic leaders called on President Bush to fight gasoline price gouging by supporting legislation to strengthen enforcement and penalties.

- In a letter, Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and 14 other Democrats criticized the president's "absence of leadership" and threatened to move ahead with their own proposals if they could not win cooperation from the White House.
- U.S. crude oil futures meanwhile reached a record \$70.88 a barrel amid concerns over Iran's nuclear intentions and supply disruptions in Africa.
 - The average national price for a gallon of gasoline hit \$2.78, up 20 cents from the beginning of the month, the Energy Department said.
 - President Bush said he is concerned about the rising prices and the government would be protecting consumers against unfair practices.
 - ✓ In their letter, Democrats cited a bill (S 1735) sponsored by Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., to impose tougher fines and penalties on companies that take advantage of supply emergencies and give the Federal Trade Commission and state attorneys general new authority to enforce laws against price gouging.

- ✓ They called for Bush to back legislation before the summer driving season begins Memorial Day weekend.

**The mission of the Louisiana Rural Health Association is to serve as a unified voice for the promotion of rural health care through advocacy, education, and leadership. The information above was provided in part by the National Rural Health Association and gathered from various publicly released documents of news related sources.*