

THE ADVOCATE

Groups ask to kill cuts to colleges

BY JORDAN BLUM
Capitol news bureau

The Baton Rouge Area Chamber and the business-funded Blueprint Louisiana group asked the Legislature on Thursday to eliminate all proposed budget cuts for higher education.

The request to the Senate Finance Committee was to allow colleges to evolve and adapt to the recession economy before instituting any of the proposed "draconian" cuts of 15 percent of their state funds.

The arguments from the business community were even

stronger than from higher education officials, who have asked that their proposed \$219 million in cuts be halved.

"Don't cut higher education so much that you gut it and lose it and set higher education back 20 years," said Blueprint member Jimmy Maurin, chairman of Stirling Properties in Covington.

Maurin was one of about 10 members of the nonprofit advocacy Blueprint group who either testified or wrote letters in

► See COLLEGES, page 5A

COLLEGES

Continued from page 1A

support of colleges during Thursday's public input hearing for higher education.

BRAC President Adam Knapp said budget cuts would particularly hurt the Baton Rouge area, which has two major universities and community and technical colleges.

LSU actually needs close to \$115 million more annually to be competitive with the top public research universities, Knapp said, rather than be cut by nearly \$45 million.

Knapp also said BRAC is backing Senate Bill 335, which would temporarily delay a scheduled tax cut for middle- and upper-income taxpayers who itemize charitable donations, home mortgage interest and certain medical costs on their state income tax forms.

SB335 could generate \$118 million for higher education.

But the bill is considered a tax increase and opposed by Gov. Bobby Jindal and a group of 55 House members, which would be enough to kill the legislation.

Knapp called SB335 "critical" to colleges "even if it faces a tough climb."

The House members argued that colleges have received funding increases in recent years and can sustain moderate cuts during a time of declining state revenue.

Several students also testified against college budget cuts Thursday.

Allison Reynolds, Louisiana Tech University student body president, argued that tomorrow's economic development in Louisiana is dependent on today's higher education quality.

"As students, we can't and don't expect the world to revolve around us," Reynolds said. "We can't expect to be spoon fed funding."

That is why she said she and other student leaders statewide are supporting 5 percent tuition increases to generate another \$30 million for colleges.

Diane Allen, outgoing College of Education dean at

Southeastern Louisiana University, testified that she and many faculty are leaving Louisiana for university jobs in other states at least partly because of the budget cuts.

State Commissioner of Higher Education Sally Clausen noted that colleges are cutting 87 academic programs to save money and avoid duplication.

Students from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette protested Thursday the elimination of the school's philosophy bachelor's degree.

There is, however, some funding progress for colleges.

Jindal said he is considering, but not yet backing, using the state's rainy day fund in a swap-out for \$50 million the state House set aside for colleges from the state tax amnesty fund.

The Jindal administration expressed concern about using nonrecurring tax amnesty money for higher education. But Jindal said he might be willing to put the \$50 million in amnesty money into the state's rainy day fund and then push rainy day money into colleges.

Apart from the \$50 million in tax amnesty, the House also gave \$10 million more to the LSU and Southern University agricultural centers.

Another \$13 million was set aside for college library purchases and dual enrollment programs.

While the maximum proposed budget cuts are 15 percent of the \$1.4 billion in state funding for colleges, the Jindal administration notes that the cuts are 7.7 percent of total college funding.

That drops to about 4 percent when the rainy day money, tuition increases and other measures are all factored in.

Baton Rouge-area legislators organized against SB335 are Steve Carter, R-Baton Rouge; Franklin Foil, R-Baton Rouge; Hunter Greene, R-Baton Rouge; Eddie Lambert, R-Prairieville; Erich Ponti, R-Baton Rouge; J. Rogers Pope, R-Denham Springs; Cliff Richardson, R-Livingston; Mert Smiley, R-St. Amant; Major Thibaut, D-New Roads; and Bodi White, R-Central.