

St. Landry Parish considers redistribution of racino funds

BY WILLIAM JOHNSON • WJOHNSON@DAILYWORLD.COM • NOVEMBER 7, 2008

The St. Landry Parish Council's Finance Committee has voted to re-examine the distribution of Evangeline Downs Racetrack and Casino funds to hopefully find more money for roads.

"The people were told these funds would be used to overlay roads. We need to look into these racino funds again," said District 1 Councilman Jerry L. Red Jr.

The money Red is referring to is the roughly \$3.5 million a year the Downs contributes to the parish through a 4 percent tax on its slot machine gaming profits.

Thanks to a complicated distribution formula, every municipality and most parish agencies get a share of that money. As a result, only about half of this money is actually used for roads.

Red's plan calls for stripping off half the money that goes to the parish's 12 municipalities and about a third of the money that goes to various agencies from the parish coroner's office to the clerk of courts.

Red estimates, if all these changes are implemented, they would total about \$400,000 a year. "If we had that money, we could start overlaying our roads," Red said.

With roads costing about \$200,000 a mile to rebuild, it wouldn't go that far, but Red said anything will help.

"Our roads are in such deplorable shape it will take us years, but at least it will show we are doing what we can," Red said.

The finance committee didn't vote to recommend Red's plan to the full council, but it did vote to ask for comments from all the affected municipalities and agencies.

Red's proposal was generally supported by the council, which expressed frustration of its inability to address the many serious problems on the parish's roughly 900 miles of roads.

"The people were promised roads. We have no money for roads," said District 8 Council member Pam Gautreau.

"All the people care about is roads. We have been in office for a year and we haven't done anything," said District 3 Council member Fekisha Miller.

"(These cuts) aren't going to hurt anyone. I don't feel they would miss it," said District 11 Councilman Jay Guidry.

The only member to offer a word of caution was District 5 Councilman Ronald Buschel. Buschel is one of the few members of the current council who was in office when plans to relocate the racetrack from Lafayette Parish to St. Landry Parish were first proposed.

"This didn't come simple. It came hard," Buschel said. "St. Martin Parish would have been glad to have that casino."

Pointing out that five parishwide road funding proposals have been rejected by the voters during his term in office, Buschel argued the current distribution formula was critical in gaining the votes needed to bring in the Downs.

"If we had not divided it, it wouldn't have passed. To get the municipalities on board we had to give them a share," Buschel said.

Parish President Don Menard also expressed concern, pointing out that the parish is required by state law to fund most parish agencies. If their share of the Downs money is reduced, he said the agencies are within their rights to demand more money from the parish's general fund.

"If you take it from Peter, Paul is going to have to find the money," Menard said.

The committee also spoke in general about several other road funding options, including a \$25 user fee for vehicles, moving some money out of road maintenance and into resurfacing and a possible sales tax increase in the rural parts of the parish.