

Council elects Dupre chairman

BY WILLIAM JOHNSON • WJOHNSON@DAILYWORLD.COM • JUNE 26, 2008

The St. Landry Parish Council Wednesday night elected District 6 Councilman Hurlin Dupre as its new chairman in a special called meeting.

Former Chairman Kenneth Vidrine resigned his leadership post last week after the council approved a "cash for trash" plan in a late-hour vote on an item that was not on the agenda.

Vidrine, who had earlier in that meeting told the audience the item would not be considered, argued he had been blindsided by the vote.

At Wednesday's meeting District 5 Councilman Ronald Buschel was nominated for chairman by Vidrine but declined, saying there were more qualified candidates.

Council Vice Chairman Dexter Brown also declined, saying his duties as the assistant principal at Beau Chene High School would make him unable to give the job the time it deserves.

In the end, the vote came down to Dupre and District 7 Councilman Albert Hollier, with Dupre winning by six votes to four.

This is Dupre's third term on the council. He was first elected as a police jury member in 1988 but stepped down in 1992 to deal with problems on his farm.

When the Home Rule Charter replaced the police jury with the parish council, he ran again in 2004 and won. He was re-elected to a third term in last fall's election.

Dupre said he is looking forward to his new duties. "I've been wanting to come up here for a long time," Dupre said. "We have plenty of goals to achieve."

As for the dispute about the "cash for trash" vote, which he supported, Dupre said the parish needs all the help it can get to address serious road problems.

"I wish the people will approve all three plans," Dupre said, referring to the "cash for trash" plan and the two votes required for Parish President Don Menard's "Roads For Our Future" proposal.

At last week's meeting, the council had voted to put all three items on the Oct. 4 ballot.

District 11 Councilman Jay Guidry, who made the motion to add the "trash for cash" plan to the agenda, defended the council's action.

Guidry said it was only during that meeting that he and most of the other council members were made aware of how tight the timeline is for adding items to that ballot.

In his presentation on his proposals, Menard had urged the council to move immediately. The deadline for items to be added to the Oct. 4 ballot is July 25.

"We didn't realize we had a deadline until then," Guidry said.

The original plan had been to debate the "cash for trash" plan again at the July council committee meetings and then vote the plan up or down at its regular meeting on July 16.

As several steps are required after a council vote before a proposal can be submitted to the Secretary of State's office, which prepares the ballot, Guidry said the council felt it had to act immediately.

As for amending the agenda, Council Legal Advisor Andrea West said can be amended at any time by a two-thirds vote. As the vote was 8 to 3, the council had that majority.

The plan would allow the parish landfill to accept waste from neighboring parishes with the tipping fees, the price paid by each truck to unload its garbage, dedicated to road repairs.

Guidry said the council's vote does not authorize the landfill to begin the process of accepting outside waste. "We voted to let the people have a voice rather than us. We left it up to the people to give that blessing," Guidry said.

In the vote, the council set limits on the program as well. The proposal they plan to put on the ballot would only authorized the plan for a five-year test period.

"That will let us re-evaluate the proposal after we see where we stand," Guidry said.

While the new council, which took office Jan. 1, has dealt with many issues, its overriding concern has been how to address what has been described as a \$100 million backlog of needed road repairs.

Menard's proposal, if approved by voters in the unincorporated portions of the parish, would do away with the parish's nine roads special taxing districts and create a new parishwide 10-mil, 10-year property taxing district dedicated to roads. Menard has estimated such a district will generate about \$3 million a year.

The second phase of Menard's plan calls for diverting \$500,000 a year from the St. Landry Parish Solid Waste Disposal District to roads. As Solid Waste is funded by a .8 cent parishwide sales tax, any diversion of its funds must be approved by all voters.

As for the "cash for trash" plan, how much it might generate is less clear. Figures of between \$2 million and \$5 million-a-year have been discussed.

"That is an open-ended question. It depends on volume," Guidry said. "The council would set the amount and the time limit."

Despite the uncertainty, Guidry argues it is worth looking into. "It is a new source of revenue that doesn't fall on the backs of parish landowners," Guidry said.

Despite last week's hasty vote, Guidry said the council's decision was not taken without a great deal of thought.

Guidry, like most other council members, has held public input meetings in his district and earlier this month the entire council held a meeting for all concerned individuals.