

Road fund battle brews

Menard vows to get solid waste money

BY WILLIAM JOHNSON • WJOHNSON@DAILYWORLD.COM • JUNE 18, 2008

While the St. Landry Parish Solid Waste Disposal District Commission took no vote Tuesday night on a plan to redirect \$500,000 of its money to road repairs, parish President Don Menard said it really didn't matter.

"I'm going to ask the parish council to consider it. I think the votes are there," Menard told the commission.

The commission had called a special meeting to ask Menard to explain his proposal that was first put before the parish council last month as part of a three-part plan to generate about \$4 million-a-year for road repairs.

Menard's plan calls for doing away with the nine existing roads special taxing districts and replacing them with a new, 10-mill, 10-year parishwide property tax in the unincorporated portions of the parish.

He said that should generate about \$3 million-a-year. To come up with the other million, he proposed transferring \$500,000 a year from the parish's portion of gaming profits at Evangeline Downs Racetrack and Casino and another \$500,000 from the parish Solid Waste Disposal District.

Two of those options would require a vote of the people. Redirecting the gaming money requires no vote. The parishwide roads taxing district would require a positive vote of the 52 percent of residents who live outside the parish's 12 municipalities.

The solid waste proposal, as it deals with a parishwide sales tax, would require a positive vote from all parish residents.

"We are constantly looking at ways to improve our roads. We have been talking about bad roads for 40 years. What we are doing now is simply not working," Menard said.

While only a few of the nine commission members spoke, if those who did are any indication, that blessing is not going to be forthcoming.

"You are robbing Peter to pay Paul," said Commissioner Cyrus Auzenne, who argued solid waste doesn't have the money to spare.

He said IESI, which holds the parish trash collection contract, is asking for a \$400,000-a-year increase in its fee. The landfill is rapidly approaching the point where it will be required to capture the greenhouse gases it gives off - a feature that will cost millions.

Commissioner Gardie McManus pointed out the commission is losing about \$300,000 a year on its recycling effort, an effort it might have to kill if the money gets short. "Do you want to be known as the man that killed recycling?" McManus asked Menard.

"We are doing a good job. Don't take that away from us," Auzenne said.

Menard argued the money is there. Solid waste is funded by a .8 cent parishwide sales tax. As the parish grows, so does the money that tax generates.

Menard said, according to the state Legislative Auditor, that tax generated \$4.5 million in 1996. In 2006, the most recent audit on file, that tax brought in \$8.4 million.

"In a 10-year period your income has almost doubled. You can't show me where the cost of your services has doubled," Menard said, waving copies of audits.

He also argued that if the parish's roads are repaired, business will boom, meaning sales tax receipts will grow.

He pointed to Tangipahoa Parish, which put in a 1-cent sales tax in 1992 dedicated to road improvements. The first year that tax brought in \$4 million. Last year it brought in \$18 million.

"That is all attributable to road improvements," Menard said. "When they built the roads, the people came and built houses. When the houses came, the businesses followed."

Menard's plan is one of several currently being debated by the parish council. While no decision has been reached, the council has said it hopes to put several plans on the ballot this fall for a vote of the people.