

Three-part road plan proposed

BY WILLIAM JOHNSON • WJOHNSON@DAILYWORLD.COM • MAY 29, 2008

At a well-attended public hearing Wednesday night, Parish President Don Menard put not one but three proposals before the council to tackle the parish's road problems.

The hearing had been called to debate his Roads For Our Future plan, which proposes a 10-mill, 10-year parishwide property tax in the unincorporated portions of the parish.

Menard put that plan forward but also 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.

The casino money is already dedicated to roads, but at present it is used exclusively for road maintenance on the parish's 1,000 miles of blacktop and gravel roads.

Menard argued that much of that money is currently being wasted. "We are trying to maintain roads that are beyond the point of maintenance," Menard said.

He suggested rebuilding these road from the ground up will reduce the need for maintenance.

As for the Solid Waste proposal, he said he has spoken with several Solid Waste commissioners who raised no objections.

"They have \$16 million in reserve. That is a lot of money and we have a huge need," Menard said.

He estimated the parishwide road taxing district will generate \$2.6 million a year, for a total of \$3.6 million a year if all three proposals are adopted.

He argued that amount should increase almost every year, pointing 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 the roads are improved, people will come, more businesses will be attracted. It is a win-win for everyone."

He said the three proposals are designed to address the many complaints he heard when he last proposed the Roads For Our Future plan in 2005, which was rejected by the voters.

"Since then I've learned a lot, I've listened a lot," Menard said.

That proposal was for a 15-mill, 25-year plan. Some argued it was too high, others that it was for too long a period of time. Both are reduced this time.

Another objection was that the people in the parish's 12 municipalities drove on the roads but didn't have to pay. The Solid Waste money, which is generated by a parishwide sales tax, would require everyone to pay something.

Finally, many people complained that the gaming tax had been sold to the public as a cure-all for the roads. This plan at least calls for putting some of that money into building new roads.

Of these proposals, only two would need to be put on the Oct. 4 ballot - the Roads For Our Future plan and the rededication of the Solid Waste money. The casino money would simply be moved from one fund to another.

He argued that should the parishwide road district be created, most residents would actually see a decrease in their taxes. About 80 percent of St. Landry Parish residents live in an area already served by one of nine existing taxing district and are already paying 10 mills or more in property taxes.

"If this is passed, all other districts will become null and void. It won't be two taxes as people were told in 2005," Menard said. He called the existing road districts inefficient.

"Seventy-two percent of the dollars generated for roads in this parish are in the hands of people over which we have no control. We have no input in how they spend or don't spend the money," Menard said.

"If what was in place now was working, we wouldn't be having this meeting," Menard said.

Scores of residents packed the council's meeting room, although only one, Winfred Sibille, spoke in favor of the plan, actually any plan.

"There is no fair tax," Sibille said. "We have a new council. I just hope you are statesmen enough so that we can have a parish that is not the laughingstock of our state."

Gene Prudhomme and Alvin Auzenne felt otherwise.

"I'm tired of paying taxes," said Prudhomme, who owns a business near Lawtell. "People who are homestead exempt don't pay, the cities don't pay. We business owners have to pay for everything."

"You show me that you will improve (my road), I'll be in favor of this," said Auzenne, who lives on Stage Road, which has a low priority rating.

"The majority of people in my district don't want a tax. Period," said District 1 Councilman Jerry L. Red Jr.