

Louisiana Speaker of the House and Terrytown native Jim Tucker recently attended the November Terrytown Civic Association meeting.

He discussed several state and local issues with residents on topics such as the Crescent City bridge toll, state budget issues and possible redistricting for the area. One of the main issues of the night was the upcoming state budget. Tucker said the budget will decrease.

"The last session was difficult," he said. "The state is currently facing a deficit of \$1.6 billion this year."

Tucker said one of the reasons for the current financial strain is because of one-time spending funds that were put into the recurring budget. For example, there was an increase in funding after Hurricane Katrina. When the government created a budget for the following year, they took the hurricane funding into account, which eventually caused problems.

Tucker also discussed the state of higher education in Louisiana. He said although there have been budget cuts, citizens may not be aware of some of the reasons behind them.

"The state has about 6,000 fewer students and 3,000 more employees post-Katrina, in higher education," he said.

However, the issue doesn't just apply to the education system. He added that Louisiana has 27,000 more state employees than the Southern national average. Tucker said the state hasn't been effective in terms of budgeting and spending.

"There are going to be major cuts because of the current budget structure, and now we have to deal with things in crisis mode," he said. "We don't really want to, but that's the state that we're in."

Tucker said that when dealing with budget problems, there are four main options. They include raising taxes, cutting spending, one-time funding and suspending tax exemptions, and credits and deductions. He said the House of Representatives is figuring out the best ways to fix the issues.

He said the important thing is to minimize budget cuts in good and beneficial areas and cut down on wasteful spending habits.

Even with the current budgeting woes, Louisiana still has a lot to build upon.

"According to 2008 statistics, Louisiana rated the highest in income per capita in the Southern region," he said. "So, the problem isn't revenue -- it's spending; primarily on health care, which takes up about one third of our budget."

He added that Louisiana is now ranked the ninth business-friendly state in the nation. The previous rank was 45th.

Tucker also discussed possible redistricting issues because of population decreases in the state. There could be upcoming redistricting in the House of Representatives, Senate, congressional districts, Supreme Court and the Public Service Commission, among others.

One of the last issues discussed was the possibility of eliminating bridge tolls on the Crescent City Connection. The tolls are scheduled to be done away with if there is no intervention by the end of 2012.

The main services paid for by the bridge tolls are maintenance, ferries and the bridge police. Tucker said if the tolls are eliminated, the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development will then have to fund both the ferries and bridge maintenance. This would increase the DOTD's spending by about \$26 million.

The responsibilities of the bridge police would be taken over by the State Police. Some citizens said they believed the State Police would do an adequate job by themselves. However, Tucker voiced concerns because they would only be available on an as-needed basis.

"When there's a wreck, there will be a lot more traffic for a longer period of time," he said. "The Crescent City Connection is the fifth busiest toll bridge in the nation, so it's a pretty big deal."

The Terrytown Civic Association meetings are held on the first Wednesday of every month at 7 p.m. They will be held at the Terrytown Volunteer Fire Department Station 51, 341 Heritage Ave., until further notice.

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