

top of the news

La. heavy in state health care and corrections workers

Budget will be the focus of rare Sunday session

Jindal signs bill for silencers when hunting nutria

AROUND THE CAPITOL

Skewing the stats

Louisiana has more government workers employed in hospitals and corrections than most other states, but it ranks about average in most other categories of state employment, according to a new report. The figures from the Louisiana Budget Project, a left-leaning nonprofit group that tracks state spending, is designed to counter claims by state Treasurer **John Kennedy** and others that Louisiana is among the national leaders in state workers per capita and needs to sharply reduce its workforce. The report says the figures for Louisiana are skewed by the Louisiana State University-run Charity Hospital system, which performs services that other states handle at the local level. "Simply put, in Louisiana, people on the state payroll are doing jobs that in other states are done by people on the state, local, private or nonprofit payrolls," the report says. The report says Louisiana ranks 11th nationally for the number of state employees per capita and 10th in total government employees per capita -- a figure that includes local government workers -- but ranks third overall in the number of state workers employed by hospitals. And with an incarceration rate that leads the world, Louisiana also ranks seventh nationally in the number of state and local prison workers per capita. But when hospital employees are excluded, Louisiana's total number of government workers per capita falls to 19th. Whether the report will have any effect is unclear. The day before its release, a bill that Kennedy had been pushing to reduce the state's workforce by 15,000 over three years, mostly through attrition, stalled in the Senate Finance Committee.

Senate convenes Sunday

A final agreement on the \$25 billion state operating budget appears to be close as the full Senate prepares to debate the bill during a rare Sunday afternoon session that begins today at 2:30 p.m. At least that was the word from House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, who said last week that he was pleased by the latest version of House Bill 1 that won approval in the Senate Finance Committee. "All of us on the House side agree that we're in much better shape than we were afraid we might be at this point in the process," Tucker said. Although the Senate committee restored about \$200 million in spending that the House had proposed to cut, including money for health care and public safety programs, Tucker said he thinks the changes will pass muster with conservatives because the Senate also realigned spending to limit the amount of "one-time"

money being spent on recurring expenses. The amount of one-time money in the budget had been a sticking point for the House, which passed a new rule restricting how much can be included without a two-thirds vote. But Tucker said Friday that he thinks the Senate's version of the budget complies with the new restrictions, which lessens the chance of a standoff between the chambers as the session winds down toward its scheduled adjournment on Thursday. "We appreciate the Senate working with us to stay within the parameters of the ... rule," Tucker said. "Hopefully, we can conclude this soon."

\$3.5 million to end tolls?

Sen. John Alario, R-Westwego, said last week that he wants to know why the Department of Transportation and Development needs \$3.5 million to hire a consultant to "develop a plan for closing the Crescent City Connection" and to assist in staffing and other operations "until the tolls expire." Alario said he did not know how the financing was added to House Bill 1, the state budget bill. He said the need for a \$3.5 million contract to start the process of winding down toll collections -- if that is what lawmakers decide to do -- seems excessive. The amendment was approved by the Senate Finance Committee last week. "I want to know more about it," said Alario, who missed a day or two of meetings due to illness. Alario said he has asked department officials to appear before the Senate Finance Committee today at 2 p.m. to explain the budget amendment. The full Senate is expected to debate the state's operating budget later in the day. Department officials said the money is for work that has already been done and remains to be done by HNTB, the firm retained to study which agencies would assume duties for lighting, maintenance and police patrols on the span if the tolls are not renewed.

Shhhh! Nutria sleeping

Gov. Bobby Jindal has signed House Bill 1691 by Rep. Cameron Henry, R-Jefferson, to allow a firearms silencer to be used in hunting "outlaw quadrupeds" along with nutria and beaver. Henry said the bill also is designed to help track down and bag feral hogs, which are a growing nuisance in farm areas and in some suburban areas. Jindal has also signed into law another bill aimed at getting rid of animals that poach crawfish ponds. House Bill 164 by Rep. Bobby Badon, D-Carencro, allows hunting year-round, day or night, of nutria, otters, muskrat, mink, raccoons and opossums that destroy crawfish ponds and eat the crawfish. The bill allows hunting the nuisance predators with either a rimfire rifle no larger than .22 caliber or a shotgun no larger than 12 gauge that shoots non-toxic shot no larger than a BB. Badon said the smaller ammo is needed to limit stray shots from injuring pedestrians or vehicles. Jindal has also signed into law Badon's House Bill 187 that denies a sex offender 60 and older the privilege of getting a free state-issued identification card, a privilege given other nondrivers 60 and older. All of the new laws go into effect Aug. 15.

Tag would help food banks

A bill designed to give financial help to food banks through a special license plate is awaiting a final vote in the Senate. The Senate Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works last week unanimously approved House Bill 343 by Rep. Juan LaFonta, D-New Orleans. If it passes the full Senate, it will go to Gov. Bobby Jindal for his approval or veto. LaFonta's bill authorizes the Office of Motor Vehicles to create a "Feeding Hope" license tag, to be designed in conjunction with the Louisiana Food Bank Association Inc. The prestige plate will cost \$25 a year in addition to the

regular cost of a tag, which is based on the value of the vehicle, and a \$3.50 administrative fee. The \$25 will go to the food bank association, LaFonta said, to offset some of the cuts the facilities have sustained in the past few years. An estimate of the money the tags would raise was not available.

Dardenne honored

America's Service Commission has presented Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne with its inaugural State Leader Award for his "passion and appreciation for volunteerism and service." The national award was presented recently to Dardenne at the National Conference on Volunteerism and Service in New Orleans. The organization pointed out that Dardenne has been a longtime volunteer fundraiser and activist with the Muscular Dystrophy Association and has co-hosted the Baton Rouge segment of the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Muscular Dystrophy Telethon. In the public sector, the association said, Dardenne has been "a constant advocate for litter abatement."

staying in touch

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TRACKING BILLS

Citizens can find the Louisiana legislative home page on the Internet at www.legis.state.la.us. Information on legislators, committee assignments, schedules and bills is available, as well as information on services for people with disabilities. The Public Update Legislative Services Line or PULS Line, is available toll free (Louisiana only) 800.256.3793 outside Baton Rouge. Legislative staff will answer questions about bills, direct callers to committee information and explain aspects of the legislative process.

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