

June 29, 2007
The Times

Legislature comes to an end without glass pockets

BATON ROUGE — The Louisiana Legislature adjourned Thursday without approving a glass pockets bill that would have required elected public officials to disclose their sources of income.

A proposed compromise died in the flurry of activity on the final day, with one bill concerning a commercial airport in the Baton Rouge area dying on the Senate floor as the clock ran out.

The dispute over the glass pockets legislation was over whether local elected officials should be included, as House members insisted.

The compromise was never even brought up in the Senate.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco pronounced the session a success because legislators put so much money into education.

"We all say education is our No. 1 priority," she told legislators. "You have put your money where your mouth is."

Before adjourning, legislators gave final approval to a bill that would put up \$100 million to attract insurance companies that write policies formerly covered only by the state's insurer of last resort, the state-chartered Louisiana Citizens Property Insurance Co., and would give a tax credit to homeowners and renters equal to 7 percent of their premiums paid, a total cost of about \$115 million.

The session saw legislators pump more than \$650 million in new funds into education, including bringing Louisiana schoolteachers' pay to the Southern Regional Education Board's average for the first time, expanding prekindergarten programs, pumping money into updating school technology, funding higher education to 100 percent of the state formula, also for the first time, and authorizing universities to raise professors' salaries.

Lawmakers also approved hundreds of millions of tax cuts and tax credits, including \$157.5 million to the 20 percent of taxpayers who itemize on federal returns by restoring those excess itemizations removed by the Stelly plan voters approved in 2002.

The Legislature also spent the state's surplus on one-time expenses, such as more than \$600 million extra into roads and \$200 million extra into coastal restoration and hurricane protection. Lawmakers also set aside some \$150 million for economic development projects.

"This has been an incredible time and incredible season for all of us," Blanco told senators who invited her to speak.

"The citizens of Louisiana owe you a great deal of gratitude. The investments you are staging are going to make Louisiana's future strong," the governor said. "Making education the No. 1 priority is the all-time best thing that you've done."

"Louisiana is a very poor state. Education is the mortal enemy of poverty, and that's where you have put your money. You made that commitment, and you've put your money where your mouth is."

Blanco, who has opted not to run for re-election, asked legislators who return to support the next administration. "We've got a lot more recovery work to do. It doesn't stop with any one of us."

It was a day of farewells, as constitutional term limits kick in this fall.

In the Senate, 15 of its 39 members are prohibited from running for re-election. A Sen. Walter Boasso, D-Chalmette, is running for governor.

In the House, 45 of the 105 members are term-limited and another 13 are leaving, either to run for another office or retiring.

No one left the Senate chamber for more than an hour Thursday as legislators bid goodbye.

"It is my prayer that the Lord will protect and guide the next generation of legislators," Sen. Charles Jones, D-Monroe, said in an emotional end to his 28 years of legislative service. As one of the most senior senators, his was the next-to-the-last farewell speech.

Senate President Don Hines, D-Bunkie, was the last to bid adieu. "This is a bittersweet event. It seems like those 15 years ago was just like yesterday that I stood here and was sworn in after a special election."

Hines, a physician, said he enjoyed his rural family care medical practice. "But I didn't feel my life would be complete if I didn't become a senator."

After his January 1993 election, Hines said he has "stood with the uninsured, the unemployed, the underemployed, school support workers — those people who didn't have a lobbyist.

"I think history will be kind to us, that we set the foundation for a better Louisiana," Hines said.

While he is proud of his work, including on behalf of rural health care, he said, "it seems like there is a lot more to do. But the good news is I think those who are coming here to take our place will be up to the task."

(John Hill)