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Missed opportunities mar session

The customary frenzied finish dissolved into congratulatory backslapping once the gavel dropped for the final time last week in the state Capitol.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco and lawmakers pointed to an array of accomplishments in the aftermath of the 2007 regular session of the Louisiana Legislature.

The governor and lawmakers had several reasons to crow:

- Pay raises for teachers that will bring their salaries up to the Southern Regional Average and additional funds for state universities.
- An additional \$600 million for state highways.
- An additional \$200 million for coastal restoration.
- An injection of \$1 billion into hurricane recovery.
- A ban — albeit not until August 2008 — on the odious spectacle of cockfighting.
- An overhaul of Louisiana's dysfunctional indigent defense system, which calls for, among other things, oversight of public defenders' caseloads and performance.
- A law that provides more transparency on nonprofit agencies that receive state funding.
- Modifications to the Stelly Tax Plan that will result in tax relief for upper and middleincome residents.

In addition, Blanco backed off her drive to sell the remainder of the state's tobacco settlement.

And yet ...

This legislative session will likely be remembered in years to come not for all that it accomplished, but for the opportunities missed.

Lawmakers could not agree on terms to provide information on how much money they make, a major blow to ethics reform.

Though the Legislature authorized pilot programs in New Orleans and Lake Charles for health-care redesign, lawmakers and the Blanco administration are still wedded to a charity hospital system that puts Louisiana out of step with the other 49 states in the nation. The governor, in particular, ignored the federal government's call for dissolving Louisiana's two-tiered system of providing health care.

Most alarming was that Blanco and lawmakers' spending spree of a healthy \$2.8 billion surplus lacked fiscal responsibility. Lawmakers failed to do what financial planners advise clients to do with a windfall — pay down some of their debt. They also foolishly ignored applying some of the surplus to the state retirement funds.

Some analysts predict that the spending spree, tax cuts and hiring of 1,100 new state employees will cause a budget crisis for Blanco's successor.

Nearly two years ago in the aftermath of the ravages of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Blanco, lawmakers, good-government groups, pundits and common men and women declared that the storms afforded Louisiana a chance to mend its political ways.

Judging from the results of the 2007 session, the governor and most lawmakers have talked a good game, but the reform mood that's growing in the streets of Louisiana hasn't made it to the chambers of the Legislature or the governor's mansion.

That, though, could all change in the fall. Sixty lawmakers — more than 41 percent of the Legislature — are term-limited and are vacating their seats.

In three months, Louisiana voters will have their own opportunity to demand that Louisiana stay the course or sail in a new direction on the winds of reform.