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[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Media

[Levee Home](#)
[Legislative Activity](#)
[Corps of Engineers
Levee Tour
Nov. 2010](#)
[Levee & Flood
Protection
Contacts](#)
[Archives](#)

Times-Picayune

N.O. could retain levee ticket revenue for a year Measure moves to House floor

Tuesday, June 15, 2010

By Ed Anderson

Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- The city of New Orleans will be able to keep an estimated \$250,000 a year in traffic tickets written by Orleans Levee District police officers, at least for one more year, a House committee decided Monday.

Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, asked the Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works to amend his Senate Bill 692 to allow the city to retain the money for another year. The committee unanimously approved the change in the measure and sent it to the House floor.

Morrell's original bill would have required the money from the tickets go to the Non-Flood Protection Assets Management Authority starting Aug. 15. The authority is an agency Morrell has proposed in related legislation, Senate Bill 804, that would oversee the disposition and management of former Orleans Levee Board's marinas, boathouses, shopping centers, commercial property and green spaces.

Morrell said that under existing law, the levee district pays the salaries of the police officers, but the revenues from the tickets go to the city's general fund. The bill would allow that to continue through 2011.

Morrell said during the next year the city and the district can negotiate a split of the revenues.

"The outgo exceeds the income (of the non-flood assets managed by the state) and that has to be fixed," said Jerry Jones, the state's chief construction planner.

Morrell said the state is not losing money in operating the assets because a settlement between the district and one of its former tenants, a gambling boat, is allowing the state to break even. However, he said, that financial settlement is dwindling.

The panel also unanimously approved Morrell's bill to create the authority to run the non-flood property. The bill would allow Jones' office in the state Division of Administration to turn over the oversight of the assets to the new authority, which would be housed in the Department of Transportation and Development through Jan. 1, 2012.

At that time, the management authority would exist on its own to oversee the non-flood assets and look at leasing or selling them, possibly to the city of New Orleans.

The authority's board would be selected by elected city and legislative officials. Rep. Nita Hutter, R-Chalmette, amended it to make certain no elected official can serve on the board, and that two more members be selected from civic associations in the areas where the assets are situated.

Hutter also amended Morrell's bill to prohibit any per diem or travel expenses to be paid to authority members to attend meetings.

It also was revised to require that any sale of the assets be used to pay off claims or judgments against the levee district.

Mary Looney, a representative of Citizens for One Greater New Orleans, asked the panel to reject the bill and allow a commission Gov. Bobby Jindal appointed at Morrell's request to continue to come up with recommendations in time for next year's session.

"We would feel better to wait and do it slowly and consistently," Looney said.

Without objection, the committee also approved Morrell's Senate Bill 772 to create the New Orleans Lakefront Airport Authority, to be housed in the transportation department starting Jan. 1. The authority will be charged with conducting a nationwide search for a management firm to run the day-to-day operations of Lakefront Airport.

Looney opposed that bill also, saying Jindal's commission exists to look at how the airport should be operated or developed.

Former Rep. Greg Ernst, a member of the commission, said the panel did not take a stand on the airport and needs more time to work. "We want to continue to study it," Ernst said. "We think this is premature."

These bills also must go to the House floor for debate and return to the Senate for approval of House changes.

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