

ENERGY AND HIGHWAYS LOTS OF PORK-LITTLE FOR LOUISIANA

by Jim Brown
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There seemed to be cheers and high fives all over Louisiana last week. Congress passed both an energy bill and a federal highway bill. Members of Congress fell all over themselves slapping each other on the back. One Senator from Louisiana was quoted as saying: "It's Christmas in July in Louisiana." But when all was said and done, Louisiana got shortchanged again.

First, the energy bill. It could be the best example of corporate welfare ever passed by Congress. Some \$14.5 billion in tax credits and spending. Yet there are virtually no incentives to develop additional sources of energy. And don't expect prices at the gas pump to go down. Even the President acknowledged that the energy bill will have little or no impact on the price of gasoline.

The tax breaks were enormous. \$3.1 billion in savings to the electric utilities. The coal industry receives some \$2.9 billion in tax breaks. Oil and gas? \$2.7 billion. And here is an eye raiser. A \$1.5 billion research fund to aid the oil and gas companies in the House district of Majority leader Tom DeLay.

And how about this provision? For years, the law has severely restricted the export of highly enriched uranium, materials used to make nuclear weapons. But the new energy bill abolishes these restrictions. The reason for removing these restrictions was supposedly to help foreign pharmaceutical companies produce something called "isotopes." I have no idea what these are but I do know that "isotopes" are produced in both Argentina and Australia without using highly enriched uranium. President Bush, to his credit, opposed this provision, but, you guessed it. The lobbyists won out.

So how did Louisiana benefit? From reading press reports and editorials, the money seemed about to begin to pour into the state. \$540 million for coastal restoration. This sounds like a lot of money. That is until you look at the problem, and see what the state actually received. The price tag on any meaningful restoration plan carries a price tag of some \$14 billion.

The money Louisiana will receive does not begin to come in until the year 2007, and then is spread out over four years. So you are talking about \$135 million a year, beginning three years from now, and only lasting for a four year period. Realistically, pocket change, considering the seriousness of the problem the state faces.

One Republican Congressman put the blame for Louisiana's small amount of funding on the backs of several Western Democratic Senators. Maybe I missed something

here. Aren't the Republicans in control of the White House, as well as both the Senate and the House of Representatives? Boy, those guys out west sure must be a devious and powerful minority.

So how about the federal highway bill? Millions of dollars to be spent over the next five years. So obviously, there's going to be big money available for Louisiana Projects. The bad news is that just like in the past, Louisiana is again short changed.

The federal highway program is funded by gasoline taxes. You send a dollar in to Washington, and then each state supposedly gets its fair share in return to take care of local highway needs. Unfortunately for Louisiana, the state is not getting its "fair share." We are not talking about mountain or western states that are somewhat isolated, and lacking in major commercial traffic routes. Unfortunately for Louisiana, there's where the money goes.

Interstate 10 through southern Louisiana has been labeled as the busiest commercial major highway route of the country. Mexican and West Coast commercial goods head east on this jammed highway route in greater numbers than any place in the country, and the traffic flow on several north-south routes has increased dramatically over the past five years.

A dollar in, and at least a dollar out -- right? Not so, according to the federal formula. Right now, for every dollar paid by Louisiana motorists, the state is getting back only ninety cents. Louisiana is at the bottom of the barrel when it comes to getting its fair share. The new legislation raises this amount to ninety two cents. Not much change.

Arkansas to the north gets a dollar and three cents for every dollar sent to Washington. Alabama gets a dollar and two cents. How about those thriving commercial interstate havens out west like Montana (\$2.19 for every dollar sent to Washington), North Dakota (\$2.16), and South Dakota (\$2.25). The list goes on and on.

In fairness to the present Louisiana congressional delegation, this slanted formula is nothing new. Louisiana has been receiving the short end of the stick for many years. But the message needs to be made clear. This deepest of the deep Southern states needs the infrastructure as its natural resources are spread throughout the country and throughout the world.

Whether it be oil and gas, sulfur, seafood, chemicals; the list is extensive. Wetlands need to be restored, and federal highways need to be rebuilt and maintained. And any way you cut it, it's going to take federal dollars to get the job done.

Prosecutors in the greater New Orleans area are notorious for ignoring their legal obligations that require them to turn over exculpatory information that might be helpful to the defense of someone charged with a crime. James Gill, a columnist for the Times Picayune, wrote last week that : "Criminal defense attorneys complained for years that prosecutors, especially in New Orleans, frequently hid evidence that might lessen the chance of a conviction."

An encouraging voice was heard last week out of Jefferson Parish District Attorney Paul Connick's office. First Assistant Steve Wimberly says that defense attorneys are welcome to inspect any evidence in his files. "If it helps them, they are entitled to it. If it doesn't, it makes no difference," he said.

A refreshing change from the norm that often takes place in the office of the prosecutor. Kudos to Steve Wimberly and the Jefferson Parish DA's office.

"Having plead guilty, I do not believe that I am any different than the vast majority of the members of Congress." - Dan Rostenkowski

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown