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UPDATE FROM 2011 FISCAL LEGISLATIVE SESSION

SENATOR LONG COMMENDS LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS SESSION ADJOURNS

As the 2011 Fiscal Legislative Session is now concluded, lawmakers are returning to their home districts having completed work on a number of pressing issues facing the state. As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, District 31 Senator Gerald Long (R-Natchitoches) worked to ensure that the budget was balanced in such a way so as to safeguard the interests of citizens, despite the difficulties caused by necessary budget cuts. On June 22, the House of Representatives approved the state's \$25 billion operating budget, leaving in tact Senate amendments which sought to plug shortfalls while at the same time easing the strain on state services and programs. The finalized spending bill was sent to the Governor with many legislators confident that the state's priorities are protected and state funds are going to be spent in a way that best meets the needs of taxpayers.

Sen. Long said, "Sometimes in life as well as in government, we end up with lemons. Fortunately, in our situation, we were able to make lemonade in dealing with the \$1.6 billion deficit. Thanks to the dedication of lawmakers and staff we were able to find new ways to meet the needs of our people. I am grateful for the leadership of Representative Fannin in guiding this budget through the process. In working together, the Senate and the House have been able to create a budget which we can all be proud of."

Among items receiving final legislative approval is the completion of an earlier comprehensive reform to higher education. House Bill 549, also known as the LA GRAD Act 2.0, authored by House Speaker Jim Tucker allows colleges more flexibility with regards to spending and hiring and firing of personnel in exchange for holding the institutions to higher student performance standards.

Sen. Long said, "LA GRAD Act 2.0 gives our universities such as Northwestern and LSU-A latitudes which they've never had before while at the same time guaranteeing greater accountability based on the performance of their students. This package represents the best approach for both our colleges and universities and their employees, as well as for our families and students. Most of the increases in tuition will be covered by the TOPS program."

A proposed constitutional amendment to dedicate additional dollars from the Tobacco Settlement fund for TOPS received final legislative approval in the final minutes of the Regular Session. The language of the bill was altered when the House inserted the renewal of a four cent portion of the state's 36-cent cigarette tax into the constitutional amendment and stipulated that the funds would be dedicated to the state's Health Excellence Fund. Voters will consider the constitutional amendment in the Oct. 22nd statewide election.

Sen. Long said, "I want to thank my colleagues and the legislative staff for putting forth the effort needed to address these pressing issues. While we were faced with many difficult decisions, we worked together in the end to come up with creative and collaborative solutions that are best for the citizens of Louisiana."

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