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Early voting available through Tuesday

EARLY VOTING, from B-1

Drive, Suite 700, near the intersection of I-12 and Louisiana 59 north of Mandeville. Voting is also taking place at registrar's offices in the parish courthouse at 710 Columbia St. in Covington and at 820 Old Spanish Trail in Slidell.

The Slidell location has seen the heaviest turnout through the first two days with 2,221 voters. The courthouse had 2,131 voters, and the Koop Drive location near Mandeville had 1,880 voters, Wall said.

When combined with mail-in ballots from military service members and others qualified to vote from afar, the parish had tallied 7,829 votes by close of business Wednesday, he said. The parish has just over 160,000 registered voters.

Wall said parish workers are doing their best to keep lines of voters moving. Most voters have a relatively short wait of 10 to 15 minutes to cast ballots, although at certain times the wait can be longer.

The number of early voters thus far is nearly equal to the number casting ballots on the first two days of the presidential election in 2008, he said.

Early voting will be conducted through Tuesday. Hours at all locations are 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. The offices will be open Saturday, but closed Sunday.

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St. John introduces 2013 budget

But Isaac is not reflected in figures

By Jennifer Boquet
Staff writer

Parish President Natalie Robottom has submitted what she calls a conservative budget for 2013 to the St. John the Baptist Parish Council. It includes $71.9 million in expenditures, a 0.1 percent increase from the year before.

Revenues are projected at $71.2 million, but will also include $157 million carried over from 2012 for a total of $228 million available in 2013.

"In keeping with my administration's budgetary philosophy, as well as the parish's current cash flow needs and estimated future economic conditions, a conservative approach was used to compile the 2013 fiscal year budget," Robottom wrote in her budget message. "However, most of the budgeted numbers were derived prior to Hurricane Isaac; therefore, any effects from this storm are not reflected in our budgeted figures. Additionally, any future economic conditions may affect the estimates of revenue, which determine the amount of monies available for spending."

Hurricane Isaac, which wreaked havoc in St. John nearly two months ago, will likely affect the parish's budget as well.

But for now, the parish is budgeting a 1.5 percent increase in revenues in 2013. Most of that will come from a more than $900,000 rise in service fees due to annual adjustments due to the consumer price index.

Sales taxes, the parish's largest source of income, are also projected to increase by more than $400,000.

Property taxes, the parish's second largest source of income, are projected to hold steady in 2013, although the parish is expecting that amount to increase in the next few years as industrial exemptions expire.

Revenues are expected to decrease in the areas of state and federal grants, primarily due to the federal government cutting weatherization-related programs as well as the removal of assistance for operating the airport. A decrease is also expected in fines and forfeitures as the parish wraps up a two-year campaign to get people to pay past-due amounts to the criminal court system. Most of those have now been paid in full, according to the budget summary.

Spending on recreation in St. John will jump nearly 81 percent in 2013 after voters gave approval to a property tax for the purpose in April. The increase will fund more programs and buy equipment.

The parish also expects a 14.2 percent increase in expenditures to keep the water distribution and wastewater systems operational.

Decreases in expenditures are expected in economic development, due to a decrease in salaries and benefits, and in debt service, due to refunding debt at a lower rate.

The parish's biggest expenditure continues to be salaries, which are projected to rise by 2.4 percent from what the parish budgeted at this time last year.

Public hearings on the budget will take place next month. The council must adopt the budget by Dec. 31.

Constituent meetings set for next week

MEETING, from B-1

with contempt of court for failure to appear.

He posted a $1,200 cash bond and was released, Stelcer said.

Witnesses said Markovich then returned to the planning meeting at City Hall.

Stelcer said Markovich was issued a summons in 2011 for violating zoning regulations and didn't show up for his appointed court date. An attachment was issued for his arrest and when police were notified he would be in attendance at the zoning meeting, they entered the council chambers at City Hall and escorted Markovich to the police station.

Markovich couldn't be reached for comment.

Constituent meetings

Two members of the St. Tammany Parish Council will hold public meetings with their constituents next week.

Ninth District Councilman Gene Bellisario will meet with citizens Tuesday at 7 p.m. in the cafeteria of Boyet Jr. High School, on Rebel Drive in the Slidell area.

The primary topics for discussion will include:

▶ A presentation on the upcoming public health tax renewal by John Tobin, director of the Community Action Agency.

▶ The appeals of property tax assessments for 2012.

▶ The wrap-up of debris removal from Hurricane Isaac.

▶ The Brown's Switch Road roundabout.

▶ The proposed parish operating budget for 2013.

▶ A draft of the 2013-2016 proposed drainage and capital projects in the 9th District.

There will be a set agenda for the meeting, but items can be added. To add an item, contact Bellisario in advance at Gencbell@tp.nsbna.com

On Wednesday, Councilman Steve Stefanek will meet with his 11th District constituents at 7 p.m. in the library of Bayou Woods Elementary School off Carroll Road near Slidell.

Items for discussion include:

▶ A review of the tax assessment appeals heard by the Parish Council.

▶ The parish government's proposed operating budget for 2013.

▶ The parish's capital improvement budget for 2013, and the capital projects identified for the 11th District.

▶ An update on the construction of a road between Airport Road and U.S. 11 near Slidell.

▶ Requests for zoning changes in the district.

For more information on the Stefanek meeting, call 985-643-4880.

LGBT advocates report police abuses

Victims routinely harassed, they say

By Claire Galofaro
Staff writer

Of the several dozen people packed into City Council chambers Wednesday, many were there to speak for those too afraid to come for themselves: young, black transgender women, routinely harassed by the city's police officers.

They told of several young people being intentionally hit by patrol cars, bloodied, asked if they're prostitutes, arrested for no reason and called names by police officers.

"The accumulation of being harassed on the street, of being afraid to step outside your door, has consequences for the rest of your life," Red Trembmel, the director of Tulane University's Office for Gender and Sexual Diversity, told the City Council's Criminal Justice Committee. "You're already discriminated against in job employment... And then to have the police going after you at the same time means it's virtually impossible to be a citizen."

Committee Chairwoman Susan Guidry invited BreakOUT!, a year-old organization aimed at ending the criminalization of LGBT youth, to Wednesday's committee meeting to present its pitch for reforms of the NOPD.

Wesley Ware, the group's director, described the group's campaign, called "We Deserve Better," which includes a training video and written policy the group created for the Police Department.

"The city of New Orleans should be investing in young people — and young transgendered people — not arresting them for walking down the street," he told the council.

Representatives from several organizations — the Independent Police Monitor, Safe Streets/Strong Communities, the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, and the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana — spoke at the meeting in support of the group's plan, urging the Police Department to get ahead of the pending federal consent decree that specifically mandates that it overhaul its policy for dealing with the gay community.

NOPD Lt. Otha Sandifer told the committee that the Police Department, which began diversity training in January, has worked with BreakOUT!

All officers, new and tenured, must take a 3 1/2-hour diversity training session, paired with a four-hour seminar in impartial policing. The sessions are taught by two officers who are part of the LGBT community.

New Orleans police officers, he said, are mandated to treat all people, regardless of sexual orientation, "professionally and with respect."

And the department has made progress, said Ursula Price, the Independent Police Monitor's director of community relations. But transgender people are still being targeted by police simply for being transgender, she said.

"I think that the young people in this room will do a good job at explaining what it feels like to be a marginalized person," Price told the committee. "But I want to remind us what we are losing by marginalizing young people. We are losing their talents. We are losing their engagement. And we're pushing them into a world of criminalization instead of civic engagement and leadership."

The committee — Guidry, with City Council members Stacy Head, Jackie Clarkson and Ernest Charbonnet — noted their shock for having been unaware of the seething conflict between police and the LGBT community.

"I'd like to look at this as an opportunity for our city to move forward," Guidry said. "It certainly seems like the city of New Orleans should be able to move forward on this issue quickly; we do embrace the diversity of our citizenship, in every part of our community."

Those representing the LGBT community said they've been quiet until now, "not for lack of courage," they said, but because of the "power of violence."

Representatives read stories written by those too afraid to tell their own. One 21-year-old wrote of being stopped by an officer who told her she looked too young to be out at night.

The officer told her to put her hands on the hood of his car, then he banged her with the car twice. She ran, her leg bleeding, and hid in the back of a truck, she wrote. A second officer found her there, threw her onto the ground and pressed his knee into her face, then booked her into Orleans Parish Prison, she wrote.

"All of this for walking while black, transgendered, poor and young," she wrote.

The incident has been neither reported to nor investigated by the NOPD's Public Integrity Bureau. BreakOut! reported it to the Independent Police Monitor, which Head pointed out has no power to independently investigate complaints against police.

Price said the victim does not want to be interviewed by the Police Department's Public Integrity Bureau, though the police monitor is weighing whether to report the incident to federal authorities.

It wasn't only those within the LGBT community who came in solidarity with them. Santos Alvarado took to the podium to speak for the city's Congress of Day Laborers, an organization for workers who stand on street corners looking for work.

"We share the same experience of being afraid to walk down the street. And we know what it means to be stopped for the color of your skin, because you look different, because you talk different, because you are different," he said through a translator. That's why we hope that the Police Department applies and starts to practice this new policy — so that we can all be able to walk down the street feeling safe, as friends."

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FEMA reimbursements come quickly to N.O.

Isaac cost city millions of dollars

By Bruce Eggler
Staff writer

The bad news is that Hurricane Isaac cost New Orleans tax revenue and forced the city to spend tens of millions of dollars.

The good news is that FEMA already has agreed to reimburse the city for most of its extra expenses.

The Landrieu administration Thursday presented the City Council's Budget Committee with ordinances covering the receipt and expenditure of $23.2 million in FEMA reimbursements for the city's Isaac expenditures. Budget Director Cary Grant said the federal agency has formally committed the money.

The Landrieu administration Thursday presented the City Council's Budget Committee with ordinances covering the receipt and expenditure of $23.2 million in FEMA reimbursements for the city's Isaac expenditures.

Of the total, $4.6 million will cover personnel costs, mostly overtime hours for police and firefighters. Almost $3 million will go to the Police Department and more than $900,000 to the Fire Department.

The other $18.6 million will pay for services provided by outside contractors who helped clean up the city after the storm, with $8 million going to the Sanitation Department and $6 million to the Public Works Department.

The speed with which FEMA has approved the reimbursements for Isaac expenses is in sharp contrast to the years of frustrating negotiations that followed the far greater destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Meanwhile, Finance Director Norman Foster told the council committee that sales tax revenue received in September, reflecting business activity in August, was down slightly from the figure for September 2011. Isaac hit the city in the last week of August, causing many people to evacuate and closing many stores for several days. September was the first time this year that sales tax revenue was down from the same month in 2011.

Foster noted that the city also lost some revenue because traffic cameras were not operating for a few days during and after the storm.

On the other hand, he said, hotel tax revenue in August remained strong and ahead of the 2011 pace, suggesting that some people checked into local hotels as the storm approached, even though at least one major convention canceled its New Orleans dates.

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Campaign against tolls gaining steam, organizers say

'Battle has begun,' group member says

By Andrea Shaw
Staff writer

BRETT DUKE / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A driver pays the toll at the Crescent City Connection toll booth. The $1 toll, which is set to expire Dec. 31, is up for vote on Nov. 6.

Their campaign may not be as visible publicly, but businesses, civic groups and residents opposing a continuation of the Crescent City Connection tolls have hit the airwaves and neighborhood meetings and fired up the Internet with email blasts encouraging voters to vote "No."

With early voting under way for the Nov. 6 election, the grassroots effort to defeat a 20-year extension of the tolls is gaining steam as nearly 130 businesses, mostly on the West Bank, have stated their opposition.

The tolls will expire Dec. 31 unless voters in Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes decide they should be continued. East bank-bound motorists pay 40 cents with a toll tag and $1 in cash.

Anti-toll leaders say they are finding support among east bank residents.

State Rep. Pat Connick, R-Harvey, who has been critical of the bridge's spending and operations, said he spoke to a group in Metairie on Wednesday night and received a favorable response. During his talks, he recounts questionable spending from a $4 million insurance policy, the illegal use of tolls for expenses associated with the Leeville bridge and the promise that the tolls would be done away with once the bridge was paid off.

"People have started paying attention, because they have to pay attention," Connick said. "They are angry. There is no rational reason to keep the tolls. We have gotten nothing but disappointment."

"The battle has begun. It's David versus Goliath," said Mike Teachworth of Stop the Tolls and the only member of the legislative task force that studied the issue to vote against recommending an extension.

Teachworth said the message is simple: If the state can maintain 10 bridges crossing the Mississippi River without a toll, why not the Crescent City Connection, too?

"It's a discriminatory tax. The fact of it is not only are we not getting our tax dollars from Baton Rouge, we're having to pay," he said in reference to the area's contribution of gasoline and vehicle sales taxes to state coffers. "We think it's unfair."

The tolls generate 75 percent of the bridge's budget, bringing in $22 million a year. West Bank residents contribute 80 percent of the revenue, but in the Nov. 6 referendum will only represent 20 percent of the vote, Teachworth said.

"We don't think that's right. The money comes out of our wallet," he said.

This week, Bridging Progress, a political action committee consisting of the Jefferson Business Council, the Jefferson Chamber and the Algiers Economic Development Foundation, rolled out a $200,000 campaign in support of the tolls' renewal, calling it a vital economic development and quality-of-life issue.

But Bridging Progress represents certain businesses, Connick argued, saying that many oppose the tolls.

"Where were these guys in 1999 and 2000? They surfacer every 15 years and then they disappear," he said.

Connick said he and some business and civic leaders have started their own political action committee, Citizens Against Tolls. "They have $200,000. We maybe have $20,000 but I think we can win," he said. "We have the right argument and the right people."

Businessman John Roberts, who opposes a toll extension, said if legislators and state officials had kept their promises to use toll dollars to build the infrastructure to improve traffic, toll renewal would be a non-issue.

"I was actually a toll supporter in 1998 as are many of the businesses now opposed," Roberts said. "We were promised all the same things, that there was to be good oversight of the money and traffic improvements. It was outright lies. None of it transpired. There is only one way to stop it: It's to cut off the tolls."

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