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PORT ALLEN, LOUISIANA

Berthelot, Ourso working to keep new bridge in upcoming budget

STAFF REPORT
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Traffic continues to worsen along the Mississippi River Bridge in Port Allen, but several high-ranking lawmakers said they would oppose set-aside funding on a new bridge at least until site selection is completed.

Parish government leaders for West Baton Rouge and Iberville said they will work with lawmakers and other officials to ensure the 2022-23 state budget includes funding Gov. John Bel Edwards wants to put toward construction of a new Mississippi River Bridge.

Riley "Pee Wee" Berthelot and J. Mitchell Ourso are moving forward on those plans after several high-ranking legislators balked over the funding amount Edwards wanted for the projects.

"That's what term limits are good for — lawmakers trying to get what they want before they leave office," Berthelot said. "I've also been talking with engineering firms working on the project, and I've told them they need to get this thing rolling."

Speaker of the House Clay Schexnayder, R-Gonzales, leads the pack among lawmakers who have said they oppose the set-aside as it currently stands.

He said he would only support the measure if the state would make its final choice on the site selection before the session ends June 6.

Ourso said he has met with state Rep. Chad Brown, D-Plaquemine, to ask Schexnayder and other House members to not shut the door on the project.

"We need to make sure



Parish government leaders for West Baton Rouge and Iberville said they will work with lawmakers and other officials to ensure the 2022-23 state budget includes funding Gov. John Bel Edwards wants to put toward construction of a new Mississippi River Bridge.

that the \$500 million for the bridge goes in the budget before the legislature dismisses," Ourso said. "I'm hoping the site selection is finalized before the session ends."

Gov. Edwards, upon unveiling his 2022 budget proposals, called the project Louisiana's biggest infrastructure need.

The \$500 million proposal could eventually ease the backups that stretch for miles in all four directions leading to the "new" Mississippi River Bridge, which opened in April 1968.

His proposal highlights a budget with \$1.6 billion in higher than anticipated revenue. The state is also in line to receive \$1 billion more than the normal \$200 million per year allocation of funding for the next five years. That money will come from the \$1 trillion federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

But state Sen. President Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, said he could not justify putting it in the budget when the project may take 20 years to become a reality.

Meanwhile, Democratic state Sen. Sam Jenkins of Shreveport believes the state should use the \$500 million to replenish the unemployment trust fund.

The proposed funding in this year's budget may be the only chance to secure that large of an amount for the project, Ourso said.

"This is a one-time grant — it's not recurring revenue," he said. "And, as the rate of inflation continues to climb, it will be harder to secure that money."

Ourso said he plans to attend the Capital Area Road and Bridge District meeting on Monday, March 28 to push for the site selection.

He said he remains confident that the project will remain in the budget.

"I have a good feeling it will work out good for Iberville Parish."

During its December meeting, the state Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) put back three sites previously eliminated from the list of where a new bridge may be built south of the Intracoastal Waterway in Port Allen and north of the Sunshine

Bridge near Donaldsonville. It moved the list from 17 to 20 sites.

"We're getting very close to getting this number down to 10, and it could get down to five," Berthelot said. "The DOTD needs to have an extra site when doing the environmental studies."

The talk of another Mississippi River Bridge has circulated for more than 30 years, but budgetary roadblocks kept it from advancing past the discussion stage.

The rate of inflation would likely hike the price tag of the project, which will probably increase by at least \$200 million, DOTD Secretary Dr. Shawn Wilson said last month during an address to the Press Club of Baton Rouge.

The state's allocation is critical to move it forward, he said.

"The federal government looks for a full commitment," he said.

The DOTD plans to create a connector route from Interstate 10 to reroute the traffic to the new bridge, which would create a connection between La. 1 on the westside to La. 30 on the east bank.

The connector route itself will play an integral role in the project, Wilson said.

"Building a bridge without a connector route to I-10 is not the answer," he said. "You've got to get to I-10 from La. 1 and I-10 from La. 30 to make it meaningful — and if we only build the bridge, we're doing ourselves a disservice."

He said it's premature to estimate exactly how much more it will cost, although he expects the price tag will swell by at least \$200 million.

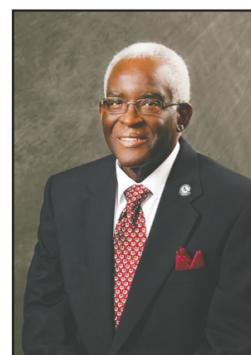
Iberville School Board member named president of LSBA

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A longtime member of the Iberville Parish School Board now has a new title.

Melvin Lodge of St. Gabriel was named Board President of the Louisiana School Boards Association during its 84th annual convention recently in Baton Rouge.

"I am both excited and thrilled about this new leadership role, and I don't take the honor lightly," Lodge said. "I've always been highly impressed that the LSBA has done remarkably well at championing for issues in a non-partisan way. Ultimately



Melvin Lodge

children are our main goal, so it's important to always remember that. Meeting in the middle is sometimes what needs to be done, and it's something I'm committed to continuing to do as an effort to ensure our state's children are always best served."

Melvin Lodge was elected to the Iberville Parish School Board in late 2002 and began his dedicated years of service in 2003. A quick rise in the ranks saw Lodge taking an active interest in all internal committees, but the Executive Committee is where he felt he could best serve the students in his community.

"Being able to look critically at proposed laws that could either benefit or hinder our children has

been incredibly important to me," said Lodge. "We speak for these children, and paying attention to language that could alter things dramatically for them, and then to be their voices when those decisions are being made, has been deeply rewarding."

Lodge has seen major improvements for teachers as well as students while with the Iberville School Board. He and his fellow board members helped pass a 31-mill special ad valorem tax that saw Iberville teachers' salaries not only rise but increase dramatically and top most other regions of the state.

During his tenure, two STEM academies were also formed, with both now seeing students not only graduate at exceptionally high rates, but with hefty scholarships due to their hard work.

"It's important to remember that our students are also children, and children excel at their own pace," said Lodge. "I'm very proud of the cohesion there's been with my fellow board members who also recognize that, and who feel that sometimes children need to come into their own to be successful. That's allowed us to encourage students, rather than demand performance numbers immediately. It's made a dramatic difference."

"I'm greatly looking forward to working so closely with Mr. Lodge," said Dr. Janet Pope, LSBA Executive Director. "He is a great leader, as he's demonstrated time and again his ability to recognize and value the 'whole child' in terms of education. I'm excited to see what his leadership will bring, as I feel that his character, his commitment, and his competence, make him a wonderful fit to further move our school boards in a positive, forward direction."

BESE approves school funding formula Includes pay raises for teachers and support staff

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The Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) approved the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) formula for the 2022-23 school year, sustaining the current level of state funding allocated to public schools and increasing teacher and support staff salaries. The new MFP includes a raise of \$1,500 for certificated teachers and \$750 for non-certificated school support staff, reflecting the education pay increases proposed in Governor John Bel Edwards' 2022-23 Executive Budget.

"The new funding formula

continues pushing Louisiana educator salaries upward while preserving financial support for public school systems," said BESE President Jim Garvey. "The MFP adopted by BESE today is a solid first step in the annual K-12 funding process, and we look forward to working with our partners in the Legislature in the weeks ahead to ensure our schools and districts have the financial resources necessary to succeed."

The resolution approved by BESE also includes a request that in the event additional funds are realized, the Legislature will return the MFP formula to BESE so that it

may be revised to increase the pay raise to a minimum of \$2,000 for certificated staff and \$1,000 for non-certificated support staff.

The formula adopted by the Board aligns with the recommendations of the MFP Task Force, a BESE advisory council comprised of a diverse membership of Louisiana education stakeholders. The task force provided guidance on identifying priorities and improving the formula to ensure the most equitable method of funding public education for the coming year.

BESE's funding proposal maintains support for certificated mentor teachers through an annual allocation of

\$2,000 per mentor teacher. These experienced local educators share their knowledge and skills to effectively coach and support new and resident teachers in their district, and are an important part of the state's educational leadership pipeline. The new formula also expands the allowable use of the Career Development Fund supplementary allocation to include course tuition for career and technical education, and increases Supplemental Course Allocation per pupil amount from \$59 to \$70.

Complete details on the 2022-2023 MFP formula are available online via the BESE BoardDocs website.

Victim in Whiskey Bay crash dies from injuries

A Hammond man died from last week from injuries he sustained in a crash on the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge earlier this month, according to Louisiana State Police.

Charles Loving, 61, was a passenger in a car that was struck on the bridge after it got a flat tire. The wreck also caused another man to fall into Whiskey

Bay. The driver of the car was Melvin Thomas, 33, who was checking in the car when it was rear-ended by another vehicle. The impact knocked Thomas over the bridge and into the water below.

A passing fisherman rescued Thomas, who was seriously injured and airlifted to an area hospital. Loving died March 15.

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