



SUNDAY 4/1/12 • SECTION C

Fee doth tax the ratepayer's soul

... only God can make a tree, while fools construct the franchise fee.
— with apologies to Joyce Kilmer

Don't get me wrong. In theory, charging utilities a franchise fee for the use of municipal rights of way to string their power lines sounds like good business.

One of the most valuable assets a city or town has is its real estate. And finding revenue sources that can underwrite the cost of government

rather than raising taxes on citizens is an idea of merit, whether cities sell the naming rights to an arena or hold out for top dollar on drilling rights.

The only problem is that in the case of franchise fees, citizens end up paying for the privilege of being shrewd real estate managers. The Public Service Com-

mission allows utilities like SWEPCO to pass along those franchise costs directly to ratepayers in the town that levies the fee.

Well, half of the fee anyway. The other half is also passed along to utility customers throughout the utility's service area. So that means when city councils in first Bossier City and then Shreveport took advantage of an increase in the franchise fee cap — from 2 percent to 5 percent of local utility receipts — customers in each city helped cover the pass-

along charges in both towns. Your "Thank You" card for the extra \$6 million Shreveport has to spend on streets is no doubt in the mail.

What it all means to state Sen. Barrow Peacock, a fiscal hawk who represents both cities, is that a franchise fee is really a tax that voters don't get to approve. When Shreveporters approved the largest construction bond proposal in city history in spring 2011, Peacock says, voters were promised no increase in existing tax-



Craig Durrett
Editorial Page Editor

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HIV/AIDS cases on the rise

This legislative session will bring with it tough decisions that are to be made regarding how state tax dollars are allocated. There are many competing interests to be considered.

The HIV/AIDS community is (unfortunately) growing exponentially in Louisiana. Just recently, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released its HIV/AIDS surveillance report for 2010. The news was very grim where our state is concerned. There are two main points that we can glean from their report:



Brett Malone
Guest Column

» Louisiana now has the second highest HIV infection rate per capita in the U.S.

» Baton Rouge is now ranked No. 1 in the nation for AIDS diagnosis per capita of all U.S. metropolitan areas — New Orleans is No. 5.

In 2011 (according to Louisiana's Office of Public Health), there were a total of 32,113 HIV/AIDS cases reported for Louisiana (cumulative), with at least 18,602 people living with HIV/AIDS in our state. Conservative estimates are that there are at least 20 percent to 40 percent more people who are currently infected with HIV, but do not yet know it.

In short, our state is now the epicenter for the HIV/AIDS crisis in America ... and all eyes are watching to see how we deal with it as a state.

Over the past five years, HIV prevention funding has shifted in Louisiana to where there are now zero state tax dollars allocated for the reduction of the transmission of this virus. Zero dollars being spent in Louisiana that are not federal pass-through funds. I believe strongly that these reductions in HIV prevention in Louisiana are directly related to the gross increase in the HIV infection rate in our state.

People are getting sick and are dying at an alarming rate. In northwest Louisiana alone, 33 percent of all new HIV infections last year were with children and young adults (ages 13 to 24). We are witnessing the emergence of the "next generation" in the AIDS epidemic — and Louisiana is leading the way (albeit, in the wrong direction).

Also — the face of AIDS has shifted dramatically in the past 30 years. In our region of the state, 33 percent of new HIV infections occurred in women. Sadly, we are seeing an enormous disparity in our community in how HIV is being transmitted (84 percent of new HIV cases in our area were from the African-American community, 29 percent from heterosexual contact). There are proven methods for helping communities reduce the HIV transmission rate — but we have zero funds from

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As lawmakers ponder changes, state workers raise fears and questions about how their financial futures might shift

Louisiana's retirement program

Time for better plan

Louisiana is facing a crisis. The problems arise in the form of \$18.5 billion dollars in unfunded accrued liabilities in the retirement plans of our state as a result of under-performing returns, bad investments, poor planning, inaccurate formulas and fiscal irresponsibility.

It is creating a financial nightmare for our state and local governments which pass on the costs to taxpayers. It is creating a very real nightmare for those counting on the retirement benefits they were promised. Now is the time to focus on fixing the problem and not the blame.

There is a need to revise the current defined

PRO



Jeff Thompson
State Lawmaker

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Bills viewed as threat

Myself and several thousand of my state-employed coworkers across Louisiana urge lawmakers to oppose: HB56, SB52, HB55, SB47, and HB53, SB51!

I address this important issue as an 18-year veteran RN within the state health care system. I began my nursing career at the age of 34, and due to the critical nursing shortage at that time, sign-on bonuses of several thousands of dollars, and higher hourly wages were being offered at private hospitals statewide, but the carrot that the state health care system dangled before me to entice me into choosing state employment,

CON



Deril Livingston
Registered Nurse

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HB53: Provides relative to retirement eligibility for certain members of the La. State Employees Retirement System and the Teachers Retirement System of La. (primary author J. Kevin Pearson)

SB51: Provides relative to retirement eligibility for certain members of the La. State Employees' Retirement System and the Teachers' Retirement System of La. (primary author Elbert L. Guillory)

THE LEGISLATION

More than 100 bills dealing with retirement issues for various state jobs were filed for the 2012 legislative session. Here are a few:

HB55: Provides relative to final average compensation (author J. Kevin Pearson)

SB47: Provides relative to final average compensation (primary author Elbert L. Guillory)

HB56: Increases the employee contribution rate for certain members of state retirement systems (primary author J. Kevin Pearson)

SB52: Increases the employee contribution rate for certain members of state retirement systems. (primary author Elbert L. Guillory)