

Blueprint Louisiana plan meeting with legislative success

*By Debbie Glover
St. Tammany News
5/28/08*

Blueprint Louisiana, a citizen-driven coalition formed to help reform the state, has had success getting legislation passed during the special sessions and the first regular session of the new administration, according to SSA Consultants president and Blueprint founder Bill Slaughter.

Six areas targeted before the Legislature took office included ethics reform, pre-k through 12th grade education, health care, transportation infrastructure, workforce development and coastal wetlands/hurricane preparations.

The first area, ethics reform, was passed during Gov. Bobby Jindal's first special session. Changes proposed by the organization included financial disclosure of state legislators, enhanced regulation of lobbyists, transparency in state funding of local projects and Non-Governmental Organizations and increased resources for prevention and enforcement by the state ethics board. Key to this agenda was enforceable ethics. Most of these goals were met and surpassed by Jindal's ethics reforms.

Rudy Gomez of SSA Consultants said the definition of a lobbyist is now considered an important issue, something that had been far down on the list of important topics. He said the residual effect of ethics reform gained national exposure as instituting some of the toughest ethics laws in the country. He said nationally the state is getting a reputation that something new is going on in Louisiana.

The second targeted area, education, is also being addressed by the Legislature. Blueprint's goal is to expand access of pre-kindergarten to all 4-year-olds in the state. Also on the group's agenda is to do more to prepare high school students for careers and college while decreasing the dropout rate, said Gomez. Throughout the state, experimental programs are being used to redesign high school curricula including dual enrollment in college, certification in vo-tech areas, all meant to provide a plan to success. These are being considered by the Legislature. The progression to a universal pre-k program is currently being considered by the Legislature.

In workforce development, Gomez said Blueprint recommended using strong regional models to define workforce needs and then deliver the needed workforce training to that region. Then the state needs to establish "Centers of Excellence" to meet the individual demands in key sectors. Gomez said the state must expand its "rapid response" capacity, coordinate efforts and create a \$10 million standing fund to be used for acute needs.

In healthcare, the state first needs to enhance the accountability in state health care spending for the uninsured. The state's charity hospital model needs to be changed and

reformed, providing greater access to care for the uninsured. Gomez said funds need to be redirected to care for the uninsured from the facility to people or patients themselves.

When the above is accomplished, the healthcare system can then be altered to customize care for the uninsured at the regional level; expand coverage for low- income parents, provide for high quality medical educational and research facilities and maximize federal funding for medical education, said Gomez.

In transportation areas, the state needs to dedicate sustained funding for public transportation programs and establish funding to speed up mega projects. Gomez said they had determined that at least \$500 million was needed; the Legislature has passed \$200-300 million. The gas tax that is collected should be dedicated to transportation issues instead of being raided for other needs, he said. In some states, a private/public partnership is formed to build roads that are paid for by tolls, he said.

The final area Blueprint is addressing is coastal restoration and hurricane protection. The state needs to implement the master plan through approval of annual plans, provide funding for projects and identify opportunities that may speed the process, Gomez said.

He added in the past the issues of wetlands and hurricane preparedness were considered separately. However, hurricanes Katrina and Rita have driven the importance of considering the issues together.

Slaughter said Blueprint is happy at the progress made thus far. The branding of “Blueprint Louisiana” has been enormously successful on both the regional and national level in making the public aware of the citizen’s desire for reform in Louisiana.

“We are in a marathon; not a sprint” in the process of making meaningful changes in the state,” he said.

Jimmy Maurin, a Northshore Blueprint regional board member, said the group is self-supporting and doing its work purely from private contributions. Slaughter added the group has been offered funding from groups and industries but has refused in order to accomplish goals set by individuals and not fulfill an industry’s agenda.

The legislative update in Blueprint Louisiana’s agenda was given at a joint breakfast of the Hammond, East and West St. Tammany Chambers of Commerce on Thursday.