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Ascension considers infrastructure tax, fee

By **DAVID J. MITCHELL**

River parishes bureau

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GONZALES — The Ascension Parish Council will take Parish President Ronnie Hughes' broad tax and impact fee plan for infrastructure upgrades under advisement but supported his call to introduce legislation to expropriate Ascension Water Co.

Without opposition, the council adopted a resolution last week backing Hughes on seeking the expropriation bill.

That's a backup plan while negotiations continue with Ascension Water over a proposed franchise agreement.

Unlike municipalities, parish governments in Louisiana do not have the power to expropriate utility companies.

An Ascension Water spokesperson said the company would oppose expropriation but was optimistic about an agreement.

"We think we're a good, responsible citizen in the parish, and we plan to be down there for a long time," Pat Kerr, vice president of Parish Water Co., said.

A private water provider, Ascension Water is a subsidiary of Parish Water Co., itself a Baton Rouge Water Co. subsidiary.

Hughes said negotiations with the water company on a franchise agreement have not moved forward.

The franchise agreement was one aspect of Hughes' Ascension 2010 proposal the council addressed Thursday. Other key parts have been given to various council committees. They have been asked for recommendations in 60 days.

Dan Garrett, attorney for the Louisiana Police Jury Association, said he does not think the water company legislation will require a constitutional change, which would need approval from two-thirds of the Legislature and a statewide public vote.

But he said the association would probably support statewide legislation if needed.

Council Chairman Jerry Savoy told Hughes to file the bill for the coming regular session if negotiations with the water company fail. Savoy also asked the council Utilities Committee to look at the issue. He divvied up responsibilities for other parts of the Ascension 2010 proposal in the following way:

- Half-cent sales tax for roads. Transportation Committee will gather list of road projects under consideration and determine parish, state and federal funding levels.
- Development impact fees for roads. Strategic Planning Committee will get fee proposal to find a consensus; homebuyers' cost has emerged as a concern.
- Lamar-Dixon Expo Center purchase. Lamar-Dixon Committee will add Councilman George Valentine as its fifth member, determine what the parish's control and development options will be and try to establish when U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., can deliver on a \$10 million appropriation for the center.
- Rededication of one-eighth of a 1-cent parish sales tax for parishwide sewer.

Finance Committee will review budget impact, estimated at \$2 million.

- East and West Ascension drainage boards. Both boards, whose members are on the council, have been asked to review Hughes' call to bring the boards under parish government and whether dissolving them would require new public votes on their dedicated taxes.
- Use of excess fire district funds for fire hydrants.

The Utilities Committee will meet with parish fire boards and other officials and determine need and whether parish hydrants can be placed on private lines. Valentine has also been added to that committee.



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