

Transportation bill reaches governor's office

By Jim Beam

jbeam@americanpress.com

BATON ROUGE — A bill designed to increase voter confidence in how the state spends transportation money has cleared the Legislature and been sent to the governor.

House Bill 598, by Rep. Neil Abramson, D-New Orleans, passed the House with a 97-0 vote on May 18 and cleared the Senate 36-0 Monday.

The House voted 60-38 Wednesday to concur with changes to the bill made by the Senate.

Reps. Mark Abraham, R-Lake Charles; Mike Danahay, D-Sulphur; Stephen Dwight, R-Moss Bluff; Bob Hensgens, R-Abbeville; and Frank Howard, R-Many, voted to concur.

Reps. James Armes, D-Leesville; A.B. Franklin, D-Lake Charles; and Dorothy Sue Hill, D-Dry Creek, were opposed. Rep. Johnny Guinn, R-Jennings, was recorded as absent.

The state has had a Highway Priority Program for 40 years, and Abramson's measure is designed to add credibility to the process. A proposed 17-cent-per-gallon gasoline tax increase never came up for a vote, and voter distrust with how transportation money is spent is blamed for much of the opposition to the increase.

Rep. Sam Jones, D-Franklin, was opposed to the changes made to the legislation. He said it undercuts highway reforms four decades ago that eliminated the process of picking projects on a political basis. "We are just back to the good ol' boy system," Jones said.

Abramson said Jones is incorrect and that the bill doesn't do what Jones claims. He said he has no problem letting legislative committees add road and bridge work — authority he said they already have.

The public doesn't have confidence in the current system, he said.

The legislation would require the state Department of Transportation and Development to establish a multi-year timeline on the projects to be funded through the program each year, including the source of the funding. DOTD would also be required to submit progress reports.

Beginning in fiscal year 2018-19, the department would create two lists for a three-year plan for all projects in the program. When projects on the first list are completed, they would be replaced with those on the second list with the highest priority.

The legislative auditor, beginning on July 1, 2019, would annually ensure that the revenues from the gasoline tax are used properly.

The Joint Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works would hold a public hearing to delete projects that don't have the priority required. Other projects would be substituted.

DOTD would have to submit annual reports to the Legislature detailing the way the tax revenues are being used.

A proposed state constitutional amendment (S.B. 57) would remove authority to fund state police for traffic control from the Transportation Trust Fund. It cleared the Senate 38-0, but came up three votes short of the two-thirds required in the House. The vote was 67-33.

Sen. Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, is author of the bill, which, could have been reconsidered, but was returned to the House calendar Monday when it came up for reconsideration.