

## Cortez crusades for progress

Jim Beam

Raising the state's expenditure limit has become the central issue in the current fiscal session of the Louisiana Legislature. Having listened twice to Senate President Page Cortez explain why raising the spending limit is critically important has convinced me he makes a solid case for doing it.

Unfortunately, the House has other plans. It sent a bud-get to the Senate that opposes raising the expenditure limit. It uses much of a \$2.2 billion surplus on paying off some retirement debt. If the spending limit isn't increased, lawmakers can only spend \$460 million from this year's surplus and \$500 million of next year's surplus.

Sen. Fred Mills, R-Parks, a legislative ally of Cortez, explained to The Advocate why Cortez, R-Lafayette, believes raising the limit is the right thing to do.

"His years in the Legislature have prepared him for this moment," Mills said. "He sees this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He doesn't want to squander it."

The newspaper added, "Cortez is employing all the legislative wiles he's developed during his 16 years at the Capitol to quarterback a heavy lift: win a supermajority in both the House and the Senate to spend an unprecedented amount of money in the treasury to fix roads, repair university buildings and restore the eroding coast."

Cortez said the spending limit has been increased only twice since the process for doing it was established in a 1990 constitutional amendment that was approved by 71% of the state's voters. The first time was during the 2007 regular session. Rep. John Alario, D-Westwego, and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, sponsored House Concurrent Resolution 10. It raised the limit from \$10.3 billion to \$12.2 billion. The second House vote was 84-20 and the Senate vote was 29-5, both more than the two-thirds (70 and 26) needed.

The second time was during the 2nd special session of 2008. Rep. Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro, and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, sponsored House Concurrent Resolution 1. It raised the spending limit from \$11.6 billion to \$12.6 billion. The House vote was 101-2 and the Senate vote was 30-8.

Cortez is sponsoring Senate Concurrent Resolution 3, which is this year's effort to increase the spending limit. This year's limit would be increased from \$15.9 billion to \$16.7 billion and next year's limit from \$16.5 billion to \$17.3 billion.

An unbelievable amount of road, bridge, and port work was done both times when the spending limit was raised in 2007 and 2008. Cortez listed those projects one by one in his May 18 address to his Senate colleagues.

Cortez can be seen and his remarks heard by going to the legislative website at [www.legis.la.gov](http://www.legis.la.gov), clicking on the Senate heading at the top and then clicking on "video on demand" at the top.

Click on 2023, then click on May, go to the Senate chamber on May 18, and click on the arrow in red to reach the video. Cortez begins his 30-minute explanation at 1:01.32 (1 hour, 1 minute, 32 seconds).

How much support does Cortez have for raising the spending limit? The Advocate reported that the Louisiana Municipal Association and the Police Jury Association are telling House members about their badly needed roads, parks, and sewer systems.

The Rural Hospital Association needs \$42 million it would get for its 50 hospitals.

Cortez said the state is already projected to fully pay off a portion of the two retirement plans in 2029. Meanwhile, he said the state has a \$14 billion backlog in upgrading roads and bridges, a \$1.8 billion backlog in fixing dilapidated university buildings, and a \$55 billion cost to rebuild the coast.

The two new Interstate

10 bridges planned for Lake Charles and Baton Rouge would get an additional \$188 million each in new funding, but only if the expenditure limit is increased.

Rep. Brett Geymann, R-Moss Bluff, is another major player in this spending limit drama. The Advocate said he is “the intellectual author” of the plan adopted in the House-passed state budget to pay down retirement debt.

Cortez also reminded his fellow senators that he sponsored a successful House Bill 827 at the 2008 regular session that paid off some retirement debt after the expenditure limit was raised in 2008. It reduced the debt of the Louisiana State Employees Retirement System by \$327 million and the debt of the Teachers’ Retirement System of Louisiana by \$654 million.

The current \$2.2 billion in surpluses can go a long way in repairing and building new roads and bridges. As Cortez said, that is what occurred when the expenditure limit has been raised twice in the past and it can do it again if it’s raised again.