

EDITORIAL

# Good news for higher education

TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD

It's one of those good-news, bad-news scenarios that played out in a House committee last week. The good news? Thanks to the new budget proposal approved by the House Appropriations Committee on Monday there'll be no cuts to Louisiana's higher education in the 2016 budget when it goes into effect in July. The bad news? Deep cuts yet remain in play for the state's public health care system, even threatening our own LSUHSC-Shreveport Medical School and the private management partnership with LSU Health. That side of the equation has yet to be resolved, but lawmakers seem confident it will improve, too.

Here we are at the halfway point in the 2015 session of the Legislature and lawmakers have pretty much followed-through in the manner that was promised during the Higher Education Summit hosted by Shreveport-Bossier Alliance for Higher Education held just before the session kicked off. We applaud the efforts of our Northwest Louisiana delegation and the significant role they have played in successfully deploying this process thus far and are confident they will come through in some fashion for health care as well.

Headway in saving higher education was made mostly thanks to the \$615 million in new tax revenue (as well as another \$34 million in savings) that was approved by the full House on May 7. In all, legislators found about \$650 million that will help close the gap. Prior to this, state higher education institutions had been facing a cut of up to 82 percent compared with their current funding level of about \$740 million.

While this is indeed, good news, it hardly means we are out of the woods when it comes to funding issues. Opponents to raising new tax revenue have been keeping a meticulous eye on the progress and how lawmakers have been voting. According to The Advocate, Stephen Waguespack, president of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, said four measures that were approved did not receive the two-thirds vote required by law to raise taxes or repeal existing tax exemptions. Indeed, based on that alone it is estimated about \$550 million of the \$615 million approved might face a court challenge of some kind in the days and weeks ahead.

While we're happy with this good news for 2016, it does little to ease the stain and scars our state's past annual financial struggle in higher education has left on our schools.

Since 2008, state support of higher education in Louisiana has dropped by about \$700 million, according to the Louisiana Commission on Higher Education. Sad, but true, the state ranks 46th in per-student spending. Across the state, colleges have eliminated 336 academic programs (while adding 131 new ones) and reduced the number of employees by 4,734, including 859 faculty members. The number of students, meanwhile, has stayed roughly steady. After a while the years of uncertainty begin to take a toll. University officials sort of rolled these out for lawmakers during the SBBA summit. They ranged from losing top professors to missing out on research grants and funding. It's hard to operate any business, but most especially a university, without the certainty of having a solid source of annual revenues in place.

The health care piece of the state's budget puzzle still remains to be clarified. Currently state health care is short by about \$190 million in state aid, which translates into \$500 million to \$600 million when the federal match for state health care dollars is factored in. Lawmakers see making that up with more revenue or other budget cuts.

Basically, the state needs about another \$295 million next year, lawmakers say. Besides \$190 million for health care, leaders want another \$50 million for K-12 public schools statewide and another \$50 million for state's museums, public parks, state elections, etc.

For now, lawmakers seem to be headed in the right direction toward solving the budget crisis, but a lot of things can change on that budget bill between now and the end of the session. We just hope it doesn't change for the worse, yet again.