

# DEFERRED MAINTENANCE

GSU football team sheds light  
on a bigger higher education  
issue in Louisiana



When the Grambling State University football team refused to board the bus for their game against Jackson State a week ago, the nation got a glimpse into the deferred maintenance problems plaguing Grambling. As part of their protest, the players delivered 26 photos to ESPN, which can now be found online, that showed mold and mildew blanketing walls, ceilings, and equipment. The weight room floor was also missing tiles and the weight benches were tattered to a degree beyond repair. Fortunately for the players, the retired CEO of The Shaw Group, Jim Bernhard, agreed to pay for the needed repairs and upgrades if the players would return to practice. To the nation, it sounded as if the problem had been solved, but the reality is the Grambling weight room is a very small part of the much larger problem of deferred maintenance at colleges and universities around the Pelican state.



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Guest Columnist

The Louisiana Board of Regents estimates that there is \$1.8 billion in deferred maintenance at Louisiana colleges. Shortly after arriving at LSU, President King Alexander gave legislators a tour of the flagship campus, pointing out buildings in need of new roofs, air conditioning units and drainage systems. LSU has estimated its campus, with some buildings approaching the century mark, needs \$450 million in renovations and upgrades. Former LSU President Bill Jenkins told one newspaper that many high schools have more modern laboratories than LSU. The other university systems tell similar stories. Southern University in Baton Rouge had to close the nursing auditorium at one point when heavy rains flooded the building. Southern's water and sewerage infrastructure reportedly needs such massive work, the improvements will

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This is one of the photos that GSU football players said exemplifies a portion of the poor conditions of the facilities and equipment at the school. SUBMITTED PHOTO

## Light

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cost upwards of \$10 million.

Closer to home, major renovations and upgrades are also needed. According to The Advocate, northwest Louisiana colleges collectively have close to \$200 million in deferred maintenance. LSU Medical School in Shreveport was approved for \$3 million in capital outlay funding to replace failing air conditioning systems and \$1.5 million toward the replacement of the high-voltage electrical system, but there are other unmet needs. This includes \$5 million to replace the medical school boiler unit and significant funding necessary for the upgraded high-voltage electrical system.

The deteriorating facilities compromise faculty and student recruitment and reduce

our competitiveness with institutions able to offer state-of-the-art places in which to conduct research, and educational programs. This lack of reinvestment surely doesn't help Louisiana and economic development. The only school not on the list with deferred needs is Bossier Parish Community College, which still has a relatively young campus with newer buildings.

To help colleges begin to more quickly cover their deferred maintenance issues, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 426 last spring, which allows colleges to assess up to \$48 in fees per student to devote to maintenance costs. The legislature also gave \$10 million to each of the four college systems to be used as needed, which includes one-time expenditures such as maintenance and upgrades. These measures will help, but they are not enough. More needs to be done.

Perhaps some good will come out of this past two weeks' activities if we view the Grambling football team as our canary in the coal mine when it comes to student frustration with outdated technologies and dilapidated facilities. But unlike college athletes who can garner national attention by boycotting games, we must remember that most students lack such a megaphone to affect the kind of swift improvements the Grambling players will see in their facility in the coming weeks. For most students, a drive across the state line may become their best recourse, and as we know from experience, when students leave the state, it is hard to lure them back.

Let's act before it's too late.

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