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Jindal rules rein in earmarks

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State funding for churches, local festivals and clubs could dry up under the criteria Gov. Bobby Jindal has set for such projects to receive his support.

Likely gone would be funding for such events as the Catfish Festival, cultural entities like the Schepis Foundation and community development agencies like the Booker T. Community Outreach Project.

Jindal sent letters to the chairmen of the House Appropriations, House Ways and Means, Senate Finance and Senate Revenue and Fiscal Affairs committee late Wednesday outlining his requirements.

He said projects "must have statewide or substantial regional impact; must have been presented/openly discussed during the legislative session; must be a state agency priority; and must have the proper disclosure form published online prior to consideration ...."

"It's pretty clear," said Rep. Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro, whose Appropriations Committee is drafting the state budget now. "There probably won't be any — or many — (non-governmental organizations) funded."

Northeastern Louisiana legislators have so far requested earmarks for 44 NGOs with a total cost of more than \$20 million.

Earmarks for NGOs are popular among legislators who want to fund projects back home, but they have been criticized by some as inappropriate recipients of tax dollars.

The Legislature is charged with crafting the budget and expending state tax money, but the governor has line-item veto power when the budget hits his desk.

"... Any NGO funding passed by the Legislature that does not meet the ... criteria will be vetoed," Jindal wrote to the committee chairmen.

"It sends a clear message as to his position," Fannin said. "If some get through it's pretty clear where they're headed. It's good to know where he stands."

Rep. Noble Ellington, D-Winnsboro, has requested funding for 17 NGOs. Among them are the Winnsboro Gun Club (\$25,000 for its state shooting championship tournament) and the Princess Theatre of Winnsboro (\$25,000).

"We're giving \$25 million to the (New Orleans) Saints, which the last time I looked wasn't a governmental organization, but we don't want to give \$75,000 to the Schepis Foundation," Ellington said. "That doesn't make sense to me.

"What's the difference in the Saints and the (New Orleans) Hornets and our festivals and museums? I guess the biggest differences are we're rural and poor."

Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, has requested funding for four NGOs. Among them are The Louisiana Center Against Poverty in Lake Providence (\$500,000) and Madison Economic Development Foundation (\$35,000).

"Most of us are just fighting for equity in our areas," Thompson said. "If we don't, the affluent areas and large cities end up with all of the money. It disenfranchises us in northeastern Louisiana."

Thompson believes there will ultimately be some compromise.

"The money is the Legislature's responsibility to budget," Thompson said. "The administration has veto power, but that works both ways. The administration has quite a few projects of its own that need funding."