

THE COURIER

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EDITORIAL

An idea worthy of exploring

Gov. Bobby Jindal has created quite a stir by proposing an end to the state's personal and corporate income taxes.

To offset the loss of revenue brought about by the move, Jindal is pushing an increase in the state sales tax rate.

Jindal has been clear on one thing: He wants the switch to be revenue neutral, meaning it would raise the same amount of money as the current mix of sales and income taxes raises.

State Treasurer John Kennedy has said doing away with the income taxes would leave a \$3 billion hole in the budget — more than increasing the rate to 7 percent would raise.

Time will tell whether that figure will make up enough extra money to fill the gap that would result, but the idea now is bigger than the details.

There will be time between now and this spring's legislative session to hash out many of the details. Even after the session begins, legislators and representa-

tatives of the governor can tweak the proposal if the numbers don't line up.

The question now should be whether the idea deserves further consideration, and the answer is yes, it deserves consideration.

We have to start by assuming that the various state officials can come up with a plan that is at least revenue neutral in a time when we have made dangerous and short-sighted cuts to vital government services such as health care and higher education.

Some have registered concerns about sales taxes being unfair to poor people because they would have to spend a greater portion of their income on them.

In Louisiana, groceries, utilities and some other essentials now are exempted from the state sales tax. Jindal and legislators must make sure to include protections for these people so they don't shoulder more of a burden than they do now. They could do that by continuing the exemptions on necessities.

Sales taxes do have some advantages over income taxes.

First, sales taxes would be paid by everyone in the state — including those many tourists who come here to visit. On the other hand, though, those taxes would make our state a more-expensive destination.

Second, by taxing purchases rather than income, the state would likely collect taxes it is currently missing from people who make money they never claim — through gambling, drug sales and other illicit businesses.

Some have argued that a much higher sales-tax rate could give an incentive for some purchases to be made in neighboring states. That is unlikely. Car purchases, the most common transactions made far away from home, are sales taxed according to the purchaser's home parish. Smaller buys are not likely to make an appreciable dent in the state's revenue.

There are details to be ironed out. And any sort of tax move does not alleviate the need to address spending priorities in a way that protects our most-important programs. But Jindal has hit upon an idea that deserves debate.

Legislators and members of the public should wait for the particulars before they make any hard-and-fast decision one way or the other.

Editorials represent the opinions of the newspaper, not of any individual.

OPINION



We're on our own



KEITH MAGILL

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

I'm still digesting the latest revelation from the Army Corps of Engineers, which says it will cost \$12.9 billion to protect our community from inundation: We're on our own.

Intentionally or not, the agency's draft report on the Morganza hurricane levee system sends a familiar but nonetheless ominous message to anyone who believes Terrebonne and Lafourche are worth protecting from inundation: We're on our own.

Local officials are concerned the cost is so high that Congress will never approve the spending. And even if it did, state and local officials may never muster the 35 percent match, estimated between \$3.6 billion and \$4.5 billion.

"It will be very, very difficult to get funding for this project short of a disaster that destroys this local economy, which is exactly what we're trying to prevent," Terrebonne Levee Director Reggie Dupre said.

The cost has risen from its initial \$800 million because of stiffer levee-building standards the corps adopted after Hurricane Katrina exposed serious mistakes and deficiencies in the way it built storm-protection systems.

Here are a few of my initial observations after reading the corps' Jan. 4 report:

■ The Terrebonne Levee Board's decision to forge ahead with an interim levee system looks more visionary than ever. The same goes for parish voters' decision to twice tax themselves to put up the money to build it.

Within two or three years, the Levee District expects to complete the levees and a lock on the Houma Navigation Canal that will work like a wall against the Gulf. Nobody has promised the world, but the 10-foot levees and related locks and floodgates, officials say, should prevent the kind of inundation the area saw during hurricanes Rita and Ike, storms that came nowhere near making a direct hit but still flooded thousands of local homes and businesses. And the local district will do the job for somewhere around a

half a billion state and local tax dollars.

No studies have confirmed it, but officials say the levees that have already been constructed helped minimize the damage Hurricane Isaac caused last year when it made a direct hit in Terrebonne Parish. If that is the case, avoiding the costs of rebuilding a catastrophically damaged parish may already have justified the interim levees' cost.

■ Aside from the cost, the corps delivered more bad news along with its report. One official made it clear that there is no mechanism in place that would allow the Levee District to apply the \$500 million or so it will spend on the interim levee system as a match for the upgraded Morganza. That will disappoint local officials who until that point had expressed optimism about using the money as a match. And it's another major obstacle to finding the money it will take to build a bigger Morganza.

■ The state's latest master plan for coastal restoration and hurricane protection includes Morganza as the main project for Terrebonne and Lafourche. The plan, released last year, estimates that building it to protect against a storm that statistically would hit once in 100 years would cost \$4 billion. Based on the corps' latest estimate, that \$4 billion might not even be enough to cover the required local match. There's an outside chance the state could reap a bonanza from federal fines to be assessed against BP for damage caused by its 2010 Gulf oil spill. But Louisiana is competing with every other Gulf state for the BP cash. Aside from that, it's hard to imagine the state putting up much more mon-

ey — its whole master plan would cost an estimated \$50 billion over 50 years — for our area at the expense of so many other communities competing for hurricane protection and coastal restoration.

■ Locals have often complained about how hard it is to compete against New Orleans for federal attention and money to fight hurricanes. Hurricane Sandy's devastation has now thrust New York and the entire East Coast into the same game. Since Sandy, some politicians and pundits have suggested that New York needs a system similar to the one the Dutch have built to shield their nation from the sea, touted as the gold standard for storm protection. It would cost an estimated \$15 billion to \$20 billion. Who do you think will get any federal money first: New York or Houma-Thibodaux?

■ Because costs have increased so drastically, Morganza needs to win congressional authorization — for the sixth time. If history is a teacher, authorization is nowhere near a given, and winning it will take all kinds of unsavory political schmoozing and arm-twisting by officials at the local, state and federal level. Even if they accomplish that, they will still need Congress to approve the money, a separate process that will require even more-difficult political maneuvering against more-arduous odds.

If a full-fledged Morganza was a longshot before the corps' latest report, it's a pipe dream now. Possible? Yes. Probable? No.

If you're looking for someplace to vent, the corps will present its latest document to the public during a forum scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Jan. 31 at the Houma Municipal Auditorium, 880 Verret St. The free group-therapy session is the least the corps can offer to a community that has suffered so much frustration trying to save itself from the sea.

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The missing link in gun debate

It didn't take long for the tragedy of the Newtown, Connecticut shootings, which left 20 schoolchildren and six adults dead, to be co-opted by politicians and special interest groups alike, all eager to advance their ideas about how to prevent another deranged madman from taking innocent lives. President Obama is calling on Congress to issue gun control legislation that would limit access to assault weapons. The National Rifle Association wants armed guards patrolling every school in America. Legislators in several states, including Florida, want to allow teachers to carry guns on school grounds. Others are clamoring for a lockdown of the schools, complete with metal detectors and guard dogs.

To our detriment, we have revisited this scenario in the wake of every school shooting since 12th graders Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, and opened fire, killing 12 classmates and one teacher. Yet in the midst of widespread finger pointing (not even violent movies, crime dramas and violent video games have been spared) and calls for reform of the mental health care system and gun control, not a word has been said about the greatest perpetrator of violence in American society and around the world — the U.S. government.

Violence has become our government's calling card, starting at the top and trickling down, from President Obama's "kill list," which relies on drones to target insurgents, to the more than 80,000 SWAT team raids carried out every year on unsuspecting Americans by heavily armed, black-garbed commandos and the increasingly rapid militarization of local police forces across the country. We even export violence worldwide, with one of this coun-



JOHN WHITEHEAD

GUEST COLUMNIST

try's most profitable exports being weapons.

Much of this can be traced to the government's so-called "War on Drugs," which opened the door for police to be equipped with military weapons. In 1981, Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act, enabling the military to share equipment, training, and intelligence with local police. In 1997, Congress approved the 1033 Program, which allows the Secretary of Defense to transfer surplus military supplies and weapons — everything from surplus assault rifles to mini-tanks, grenade launchers, and remote controlled robots — to local police agencies without charge. Since 1997, more than 17,000 police agencies have taken advantage of the 1033 Program, acquiring \$2.6 billion dollars worth of weapons and equipment, and demand is only getting higher. In fact, a record-setting \$500 million worth of equipment was distributed in 2011, twice the amount given away in 2010.

No wonder many Americans are armed to the hilt. Many feel the need to protect themselves against their own government, whose arsenal only keeps growing and whose steady encroachments on civil liberties have resulted in a climate of surveillance wherein 1.7 billion communications between Americans, whether email, text, or phone call, are intercepted by the govern-

ment daily, not to mention the impact of overcriminalization, which has rendered otherwise law-abiding individuals as lawbreakers for such mundane acts as holding Bible studies at home, making and sharing unpasteurized goat cheese with friends, and growing rare varieties of orchids.

There are no easy answers. Clearly, if someone really wants to wreak havoc, they'll find a way to obtain a weapon. Placing armed guards in every school in the country, as the NRA suggests, would merely heighten the culture of violence and contribute to a school environment that is already in lockdown mode. Indeed, as the Washington Post recognizes, there is evidence that the presence of armed guards in schools actually increases the chances of violent incidences occurring.

However, if President Obama, Congress and the American people really want the country to reconsider their relationship with guns and violence, then it needs to start with a serious discussion about the role our government has played and continues to play in contributing to the culture of violence. If the American people are being called on to scale back on their weapons, then the government and its cohorts — the military, the defense industry, the special interest groups, etc. — need to do the same. We owe it to the victims of Sandy Hook Elementary and Columbine High School and the victims of every other senseless act of gun violence in this country to do more than score political points off each other. If we're serious about real change, it needs to start at the top.

John Whitehead is director of the Rutherford Institute, a civil-liberties organization based in Charlottesville, Va.

LETTERS

Does Gov. Jindal have a heart?

How sad to once again read of the lack of compassion on display from the one and only Bobby Jindal concerning the cuts to hospice care.

Is this guy for real? Does he have a heart? I don't think so.

Amazing how someone of his intellect and stature can go about shaking down the state he governs for tax credits and so-called business incentives to multinational corporations.

These are credits and incentives that the state cannot even afford, but they do make for some nice résumé material.

All at the expense of the poor who live in this state.

How is Bobby going to remake the image of his party with this kind of policy?

It is shameful to deny the poor the right to die in dignity and less suffering that is offered through hospice care.

What's the option for these poor people who are being denied pain and suffering relief and care in their final days?

Jumping in front of traffic?

A bullet to the head?

Pitbull attack?

Shame, shame, shame.

Thanks, Bobby. May God

have mercy on you, too.

Jean Georges

Cut Off

You can make a difference

With the arrival of a new year, many of us take the opportunity to make resolutions — about losing weight, working a little harder at our jobs or spending more time with family.

One resolution we should all make is to resist the urge to litter and to recycle when possible.

Yes, it's easier just to throw that trash in the back of the truck where it will blow out the next time you get on the highway.

And it's easier to throw away those plastic and glass containers rather than recycle them.

But it is something we could all do that, put together, could make a real difference for our state.

Louisiana spends an estimated \$40 million per year to deal with litter.

With our state cutting higher education and health care to address a shrinking revenue stream, that \$40 million could do a lot of good.

So I ask everyone in our community to make a simple resolution in 2013: Put litter in its place and recycle when possible.

It doesn't take much effort, could save our state millions of dollars, and would make our roadsides much more pleasant to travel.

You can also join your local Keep Louisiana Beautiful affiliate.

Let's work to keep Louisiana more beautiful in 2013.

Leigh Harris
Executive director
Keep Louisiana Beautiful

AIR YOUR VIEWS

Letters may be published in the Daily Comet, The Courier or both. Keep letters to 400 words. Include your name and address. Include a phone number used only to verify the letter. Address letters to The Courier, 3030 Barrow St., Houma, LA, 70360, or Daily Comet, 104 Hickory St., Thibodaux, LA, 70301. They can also be emailed to news@houmatoday.com or editor@dailycomet.com or faxed to 857-2244 or 448-7654. Letters are subject to editing. Write no more than one letter per month, and avoid writing more than once about the same topic.