

WBR council adopts new leave policy

BY SAM IRWIN

Special to The Advocate

PORT ALLEN — The West Baton Rouge Parish Council voted to adopt a new parish employee policy that will limit the number of vacation days fully tenured employees can acquire from five weeks to four weeks.

The new policy will affect only employees hired after Jan. 1, 2013, and will not change for current employees.

Attorney Dannie P. Garrett III of Butler, Snow, O'Mara, Stevens and Cannada law firm reviewed the recommended changes to the council's employee handbook, which updated policies on social media, sexual harassment and leave.

Garrett's recommendation also changed the accrued leave policy that will limit any accrued leave to 320 hours per year and roll over any excess hours into service retirement time.

Garrett said the change will eliminate the possibility of employees acquiring excessive

leave of a year or more that would make it difficult for the parish to declare a job vacancy for critical jobs.

Council Chairman Gary Spillman said he was in favor of all of the policy recommendations except the provision reducing leave benefits for future employees.

"If we have a leave problem, then let's fix it now," Spillman said. "If we change this, it means our leave policy will give a lesser benefit to our employees than the benefit for Port Allen and Brusly city employees.

"I worked in public service and I believe in the benefits."

Councilman Phil Porto agreed.

"You'll be taking from your employees 20 years from now," Porto said.

Parish President Riley "Pee-wee" Berthelot told the council that the better choice was to start limiting annual leave for future employees now.

"This is the benefit that any

new employee will agree to work for," Berthelot said. "I think 14 paid holidays and four weeks of leave is very generous. I think the majority of citizens in West Baton Rouge Parish don't get four weeks; they're lucky if they get two."

The measure passed by a 6-2 vote. Voting yes were council members Naomi Fair, Charlene Gordon, Bob Robertson, Ricky Loup, Chris "Fish" Kershaw and Barry Huggins. Spillman and Porto voted no; Councilman Randal Mouch was absent.

Other items considered by the council included:

HEALTH INSURANCE: The council voted to accept the health insurance plan submitted by Blue Cross of Louisiana that eliminated the parish contribution to employee health saving accounts.

Executive Assistant Jason Manola told the council that continuing to pay the health savings account benefit would result in a 12 percent increase in the health care premium the parish pays as opposed to a 6 percent increase that did not include health savings account payments.

Berthelot said the parish previously paid \$400 annually for single and \$800 for family health saving accounts.

The annual deduction is \$2,500 for single policyholders and \$5,500 for families.

Huggins said the parish could reconsider paying the benefit if midyear budget projections are good.

