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The Times-Picayune

Jindal urges Obama to count Louisiana in Coastal, Medicaid issues raised at governors' meeting

Wednesday, December 03, 2008

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Gov. Bobby Jindal returned Tuesday from an economic recovery meeting with governors and President-elect Barack Obama where he emphasized the importance of Louisiana goals in any stimulus plan driven by infrastructure upgrades.

Upon arriving at Louis Armstrong International Airport, Jindal outlined a trio of Louisiana priorities that he advanced in the Philadelphia meeting: Speeding money already approved for hurricane recovery, changing the federal Medicaid financing system to avoid penalizing states when disaster rebuilding temporarily increases their revenue, and pursuing enhanced coastal restoration and hurricane protection.

"I think it was a very good idea for them to gather the governors together," Jindal said of the incoming Obama administration. "I want to strongly commend the new administration for reaching out, for listening to the governors, for wanting to work with us."

Jindal said he had a brief individual meeting with Obama after the general session ended. He also spoke with Rahm Emanuel, Obama's designated chief of staff.

The meeting was organized by the National Governors Association, and Jindal praised Obama for attending, saying it was the first time in the group's history that a president-elect met with a large group of governors.

--- Bureaucratic slowdowns ---

He said he implored Obama to unclog the financing pipelines for rebuilding projects already approved, including construction of a new Charity hospital and new schools, fire stations and police stations.

"There's still many of these projects that are being slowed down because of the bureaucracy," Jindal said, adding that other disaster-stricken states echoed the frustrations. "This is certainly an issue where many other states chimed in and said they agreed with us."

Jindal also pushed to change a Medicaid financing system that is tied to each state's economic vitality. Disasters cause spikes in state tax revenue as masses of residents spend money on rebuilding, which in turn cause Medicaid to see strong state growth and lower its contribution. This system could cost Louisiana hundreds of millions of dollars, he said.

"What makes this unintended consequence even more perverse is the fact that the federal match drops just as the boost in spending (from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita) is wearing off," Jindal said. "Let's smooth out that change in Medicaid matching rates, so you're not punishing states."

And Jindal said he pushed for coastal restoration and levee improvements as part of any yet-to-be-detailed federal infrastructure spending plan to rouse the economy out of recession.

"We made the point that these are critical projects," Jindal said. "These are projects that will actually save money, property and potentially even lives, as we protect our state and our people from future storms and future natural disasters. It makes more sense to protect on the front end."

--- State ready to get going ---

Speed could be the key challenge with getting those projects into a stimulus package. Jindal said officials in the forming Obama administration were clear that any included work must be poised to move quickly if it is to help the economy.

Jindal argued reforms at the Army Corps of Engineers and years of accumulated research would make it possible to swiftly launch new restoration and protection projects. In many cases, he said, the state has already committed matching funds, and some projects have already passed federal evaluations.

"The objection that's been raised has been the corps is traditionally a slow-moving agency," Jindal said. "Our argument is that, look, enough studies have been done. We know what needs to be done. We cannot afford to wait. Every day we wait we're losing more of our coast, so there's an urgency to act."

"Quite frankly, they've been studied to death," Jindal said of coastal restoration issues. "These are projects where the corps, the state, the local parishes, we know what needs to be done. In many cases, if they would move out of the way, we could get these projects done more quickly. I don't think there are any reasons for delays."

Jindal also said he spoke to members of the Obama transition about reforming the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which he said could be reshaped to respond more nimbly to crises.

--- 'First of many steps' ---

The meeting produced no final decisions on what goals might get financing in a stimulus plan, Jindal said, but it did provide state officials an introduction to officials in the new administration headed for the White House.

"The administration used this as an opportunity to hear from us," Jindal said. "They weren't looking for a consensus because they were not yet ready to present a package. They didn't have details. But rather this was purely an opportunity for them to gather input. As they emphasized, this was the first of many steps."

Jindal said he shared a light moment with Obama regarding recent reports that Republicans consider Jindal to be their version of an Obama-style rising star.

"President-elect Obama and I had a very nice, friendly conversation about the issues," Jindal said. "As he was leaving, he made a very friendly, complimentary, joking comment. I will keep it private because it was said in private."

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