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Surplus may pave roads

BY WILL SENTELL
Capitol news bureau

Gov. Bobby Jindal urged lawmakers Tuesday to use \$246 million of state surplus funds to improve highways and bridges, which could spell improvements for Interstates 10 and 12 in the Baton Rouge area.

"We think this is a good, responsible, balanced approach,"

Jindal said at a news conference.

The surplus stems from the financial year that ended June 30, 2008, well before state revenue collections plunged.

Officials are limited by law in how they can spend surplus dollars.

Jindal's surplus proposal includes \$20 million to extend an

ongoing, \$100 million widening project on I-12.

It would become six lanes from O'Neal Lane to just east of the Denham Springs exit near Pete's Highway in both directions.

In addition, legislative leaders said the governor's package would pave the way politically for approval of a \$72 million

project — it is on a separate list — that would widen I-10 from Siegen Lane to Highland Road.

Those and other projects were recommended earlier by the Jindal administration. They would be financed by federal dollars, not state money.

However, those plans got snared in a legislative dispute March 4 and have been on hold

since then.

Senate President Joel Chaisson II, D-Destrehan, praised Jindal's highway spending plan and said he will recommend that a key joint committee approve the I-10 and other projects later this month.

"The ball is in our court

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Chaisson said.

The regular legislative session begins April 27.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro, said afterward he thinks Jindal's \$246 million package will pave the way for approval of the I-10 expansion to six lanes from Siegen Lane to Highland Road.

"No question," Fannin said after the news conference.

The state's surplus totals \$865 million.

Jindal earlier recommended spending part of the money, including \$300 million for coastal restoration. He said no decision has been made on how to use the roughly \$150 million that has not been recommended.

The governor said his plan would trigger \$252 million in federal highway aid.

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GOV. BOBBY JINDAL

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The state is already widening I-10 from the I-10/12 split to Siegen Lane.

Meanwhile, work is set to start this month on the widening of I-12.

Current plans call for that work to extend to just east of Pete's Highway in Denham Springs and near 4-H Club Road in westbound lanes.

Jindal's plan means the work would extend the same distance in both directions.

"We believe there will be a significant improvement to

the congestion," said William Ankner, secretary for the state Department of Transportation and Development.

However, Baton Rouge area lawmakers last month asked Jindal to use \$90 million of surplus money to widen I-12 to Walker.

They contend that, unless the widening work extends that far, daily backups will simply be moved eastward, not solved.

Jindal's proposal includes \$12 million to widen O'Neal Lane between I-12 and Florida Boulevard.

It is one of 43 road and bridge projects stalled because state officials say they cannot match federal dollars because of Louisiana's budget problems.

Jindal wants to use \$79 million of the surplus to replace new state highway aid short-circuited by state budget problems.

The other \$167 million in surplus funds would go to a wide range of road and bridge projects, including about \$30 million to upgrade U.S. 90.