



La. governor promises greater transparency for state's industrial tax breaks program

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(Photo Credit: WAFB)

BATON ROUGE, LA. (WAFB) – The Louisiana governor is promising greater transparency when it comes to certain tax breaks for big business.

Speaking before the organization Together Louisiana, Governor John Bel Edwards said he would order LED, the state's department of economic development, to make any new applications they receive for the so-called Industrial Tax Exemption Program (ITEP) public. He says he would have them post the applications on their website.

He also says tax assessors in most parishes will begin posting the property tax breaks given to industries online next year. "We can't give away more

than we can afford, or we'll never be able to train our people to be able fill those jobs," he said, noting Louisiana's budget constraints and years of cuts to higher education.

ITEP has been in place for decades, aimed at attracting businesses, generating jobs, and spurring the economy. Last year, the governor signed an executive order, giving local municipalities control over the tax breaks. Until then, the exemptions were handled at the state level.

The governor's pledge is welcomed by George Armstrong, one of three Ascension Parish residents currently suing the parish council over a \$450 million ITEP deal.

The 9News Investigators uncovered documents from the Louisiana Department of Economic Development that identify at least three of the four companies as Air Products & Chemicals, BASF, and Praxair. However, publicly, the council only ever identified the companies with code names, like "bagel" and "sunflower seed." Armstrong says it's essential the public knows what their leaders are voting on, especially because the deal can result in tax dollars being diverted away from other programs like public education.

"Citizens must know what is happening... It must be transparent," Armstrong said. "What's at stake, I believe, is a growing distrust of government, which is already at a very low ebb."

The three residents involved in the suit are part of **Together Louisiana**. The organization has raised questions about ITEP, saying the public is not getting a good return on investment and not enough jobs are being created.

The lawsuit asks the court to void the tax exemption agreements. Right after the lawsuit was filed in October, Ascension Parish spokesman, Martin McConnel, would not comment directly on the lawsuit, but said he believes the governor's new executive order may have created some confusion about how the tax exemptions are supposed to be handled.