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Louisiana Politics & Government

Louisiana state government spent more than \$150,000 on Cuba trip



Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, and Agriculture Secretary Mike Strain, a Republican, lead a delegation to Cuba in October. The trip cost the Louisiana state government \$150,000. (Photo by G. Andrew Boyd, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune) (G. ANDREW BOYD)

By Julia O'Donoghue

The Louisiana state government spent at least \$150,134 on a five-day trade mission in October to Cuba for Gov. John Bel Edwards, Agriculture Commissioner Mike Strain and 20 other state workers, according to public records obtained by NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. Of the total expense, over 23 percent was for the governor's security personnel.

Edwards, a Democrat, and Strain, a Republican, took the trip in part because the GOP-dominated Legislature charged the Edwards administration with strengthening the state's relationship with Cuba. Lawmakers last spring approved a resolution requiring the Economic Development agency to "develop and improve trade relations with Cuba" and return with a full report to lawmakers by February.

Louisiana is Cuba's leading trade partner in the United States, exporting about \$1.4 billion worth of goods to the Caribbean country in the past decade. If the federal government relaxes its restrictions on trade with Cuba, it's thought Louisiana could exponentially expand its import and export business there, particularly in the agricultural sector.

While in Cuba, Edwards and other Louisiana officials signed agreements with the Cuban government to expand the state's trade relationship with Cuba, if the federal government ever relaxes its policy toward the country. "We have to find a way forward, and we need to work diligently to increase trade," Strain said in an interview last week.

NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune obtained records of public spending on the trip through public records requests to LSU and four state agencies. The state government ended up paying travel bills for 22 state employees, including the governor and agriculture commissioner. It also covered expenses for the governor's wife, Donna Edwards.



Louisiana, Cuba commit to trading more -- if embargo is lifted
The governor is visiting Cuba all week.

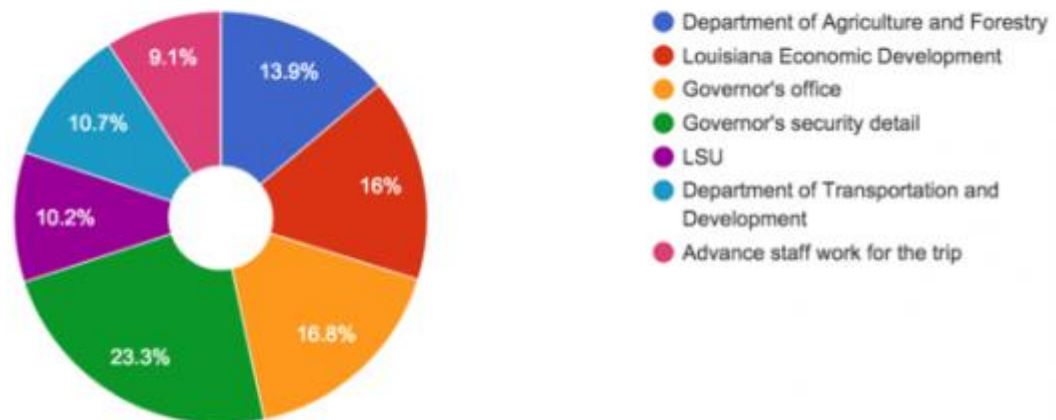
The cost of most state employees on the trip amounted to at least \$5,275 each, according to the records. All employees on the trip, including the governor, had their travel booked through Cuba Educational Travel LLC. This covered a seat on the charter flight for the Louisiana delegation, four nights at a hotel in Havana,

breakfast and some other meals, bilingual guides, transportation in Cuba and museum admissions, among other things.

Some officials on the trip - including Strain and Transportation Secretary Shawn Wilson - also had their tips, additional meals, taxi fares and some of their parking fees at the New Orleans airport reimbursed by state government. Those expenses - not submitted by every person on the trip - ranged from \$87 to \$187 for the five-day period, according to a review of public records.

The Louisiana government also gave out several hundred dollars worth of small gifts - including pens, notebooks and coffee table books -- in Cuba. The items typically have a Louisiana seal on them and have been used on a variety of economic development trips over the year. About 200 Spanish coloring books were also purchased to be distributed in Cuba, according to public records.

Breakdown of Cuba trip expenses by agency



Unelected state employees on the trip were three members of the governor's staff; three members of the Agriculture and Forestry Department; four members of the Economic Development Department, including Secretary Don Pierson, two members of the Department of Transportation and Development including Secretary Wilson, former state Sen. Robert Adley, R-Benton, from the Louisiana Offshore Terminal Authority; two LSU professors and an LSU administrator.

The governor's security staff accompanied him on the trip. When a governor goes on a trade mission, it often drives up the expense considerably. Edwards' security personnel alone cost about \$35,000 on the Cuba venture, the largest single expense of the trip. About \$13,600 of that bill was for paying state troopers' overtime while abroad.

The Cuba trip was Edwards' first trade mission since taking office in January. Previous governors also have racked up charges when they traveled abroad on official business. The state spent \$73,000 on former Gov. Bobby Jindal's security personnel when Jindal went on a trade mission to Europe in 2015; about \$36,500 of that bill was just for the troopers' overtime.

This trip was supposed to demonstrate Louisiana's seriousness in doing business with Cuba, should the federal government loosen current restrictions. In 2005, then-Gov. Kathleen Blanco, a Democrat, also traveled for three days to Cuba to establish a relationship, but Jindal, the Republican governor from 2008 through 2015, completely avoided contact with the communist country.

Delegations from other states - Arkansas, New York, Missouri, Texas and Virginia --- also have traveled to Cuba, according to Louisiana's economic development staff. But the Edwards administration thinks the Louisiana group enjoyed better access to high-level Cuban officials.

"We believe Louisiana is the only U.S. state to succeed in arranging meetings with all of the top Cuban government ministries for which we requested an audience," Pierson said.



Bobby Jindal spends \$73,000 in taxpayer funds on state police protection in Europe

Gov. Bobby Jindal's state trade mission to Europe in January cost Louisiana taxpayers \$73,000 for the governor's security detail alone. The seven state police officers who provided personal protection for the governor during the 10-day trip earned some \$36,500 in overtime pay. Another \$36,500 was used to cover the troopers' travel, housing, meals, transportation and other expenses in Europe, according to documents received through...

State employees weren't the only people to accompany Edwards and Strain on the October trip. Thirty-two people from the private sector and Louisiana ports also attended. They, too, booked their trip through Cuba Educational Travel, LLC for \$5,275 per person and took the same charter flight and stayed in the same hotels as the state employees. The state government did not pay for their travel, according to the Edwards administration.

The private sector representatives included people from Louisiana's rice industry and ports as well as The Water Institute of the Gulf, New Orleans Zephyrs, Baton Rouge Area Foundation, CenturyLink and lobbyist Randy Haynie. Two members of the news media also attended.

People attending Louisiana trade mission to Cuba in October 2016

Organization	Last Name	First Name
Office of the Governor	Edwards	John Bel
Office of the Governor	Edwards	Donna
Office of the Governor	Scott	Roderick
Office of the Governor	Carbo	Richard
Office of the Governor	Monroe-Wesley	Erin
LED - Louisiana Economic Development	Pierson	Don
LED - Louisiana Economic Development	Collins	Larry
LED - Louisiana Economic Development	House	Richard
LED - Louisiana Economic Development	Marshall	William
LED - Louisiana Economic Development	Fournierat	Lauren
LDAF - Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry	Strain	Mike
LDAF - Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry	Strain*	Susan
LDAF - Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry	Simon	Rene
LDAF - Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry	Mosgrove	Veronica
LDAF - Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry	Ribera	Michelle
Committee of 100	Olivier	Michael
Committee of 100	Clark	Tom "Verne"
Committee of 100	Schneckenburger	Robert
Port of New Orleans	Christian	Brandy
Port of New Orleans	Landry	Robert
Port of New Orleans	Kearney	Michael
Port of Greater Baton Rouge	Marionneaux	Robert
Port of Greater Baton Rouge	Hardman	Jay "John"
Port of South Louisiana	Aucoin	Paul
Port of South Louisiana	Robichaux	Dave Paul
Port of Lake Charles	Sanchez	Walter
Port of Lake Charles	Burckel	Daryl
LSU - Louisiana State University	Valsaraj	Kalliat "KT"

LSU - Louisiana State University
 LSU - Louisiana State University
 Louisiana Offshore Terminal Authority
 Biehl
 Haynie & Associates
 Breazeale, Sachse & Wilson
 CenturyLink
 Roy O. Martin
 Powell Group/Farmers Rice Milling Co.
 Kennedy Rice
 New Orleans Zephyrs
 Waggonner & Ball Architects
 FSE Energy
 FSE Energy
 Baton Rouge Area Foundation
 All Star Automotive
 Engage Cuba
 Engage Cuba
 Engage Cuba
 LDOTD - La Dept. of Transportation and Dev.
 LDOTD - La Dept. of Transportation and Dev.
 Water Institute of the Gulf
 The Advocate
 WAFB

D'Elia
 Earle
 Adley
 Gonzalez
 Haynie
 Newsome
 Koecher
 Byrd
 Lefort
 Kennedy
 Leger
 Waggonner
 Thibaut
 Thibaut II
 Spain
 McKay
 Bryant
 Jorgensen
 Williams
 Wilson
 Clark
 Speyrer
 Crisp
 Frey
 Christopher
 Jonathan
 Robert
 Roy
 Randy
 Saul
 Derek
 Bobby
 Ana
 William Elton
 Walter
 Joseph David
 James "Jim"
 James "Bo"
 John
 Matt
 Adelina
 Gabrielle
 James
 Shawn
 Tommy
 Nick
 Elizabeth
 Kevin

*Commissioner Strain's wife Susan attended the trip, but the couple paid for her expenses personally. State government didn't.

Nor was this the state's first official trip to Cuba this year. Strain lead an even larger delegation, of about 95 people, in July. The costs of that trip haven't been calculated, but it included Strain, one member of his staff and four legislators - Sens. Conrad Appel, R-Metairie, and Sharon Hewitt, R-Chalmette, and Reps. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey, and Marcus Hunter, D-Monroe. A couple of employees of the University of Louisiana at Monroe also went on the trip.

The July trip was supposed to lay the groundwork for the governor's visit three months later. It also included private sector representatives from the Louisiana rice industry, the Farm Bureau Federation, Cox Communications and former U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., now a lobbyist in Washington with the Van Ness Feldman firm.

U.S. Rep. Ralph Abraham, R-Alto, has also gone to Cuba in trips separate from the state delegations and is pushing in Congress to relax trade restrictions with the country. But it's not clear where the U.S. policy toward Cuba is headed.

At the time that Edwards and Strain took their trip in October, it was assumed Hillary Clinton would be elected president Nov. 8. Clinton was expected to continue President Barack Obama's trajectory on Cuba, by relaxing restrictions on travel and trade.

President-elect Donald Trump threatened during the campaign to revert to more restrictions on travel and trade with Cuba. He said he would undo Obama's warming of the U.S.-Cuba relationship.



Why a New Orleans-Cuba cruise could soon become reality (again)

In Louisiana, the push for a more open relationship with Cuba is bipartisan, led by two Republicans -- Strain and Abraham -- in part because of the opportunities it presents for Louisiana agricultural industry. But not all Republicans in Louisiana are on board. U.S. Rep. Garret Graves, R-Baton Rouge, said in an interview last month that he was "open" to the idea but still had concerns about human rights violations in the country. And House Majority Whip Steve Scalise of Jefferson said in an interview he was not interested in improving U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba at all until that country addressed its human rights problems. Scalise is not only the most powerful member of the Louisiana congressional delegation but also the member with the best access to Trump.

Trump's stated views on Cuba haven't deterred Strain from pushing for a relaxed relationship between the U.S. and the island country. Strain went to the White House in both November and December to talk Cuba relations, albeit with the Obama administration. The most recent meeting took place Dec. 15. The trips were paid for by the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, which Strain leads.

Strain remains positive about the U.S.-Cuba relationship. He said the next step is to have Cuban officials visit Louisiana. The 2017 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival will highlight Cuban culture, so any delegation would likely coincide with that event this spring, Strain said.

Edwards has not yet scheduled another trip abroad. In October, he said he might consider a visit to France, where several other governors have led delegations.

But state officials are certainly aware their communications might be monitored. In emails released through a public records request, Wilson warned about communicating over government email. "Please do not use this email for personal communications as it is all subject to public records laws," Wilson wrote on Sept. 8.