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The Advocate

Disclosures sought from local officials

House says all should share financial statements

The Louisiana House decided Wednesday that if lawmakers should file personal financial disclosure statements, then every elected and appointed official should too.

“What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” said Rep. Gary Smith, D-Norco.

He wanted local officials, such as police jurors and city councilmen to make the same disclosures as legislators.

The House agreed to add local elected officials to those required to give some idea of their income sources, debts owed, property owned and investments made.

Later, Rep. William Daniel, R-Baton Rouge, asked the House to tack on appointed officials — ranging from state agency heads to those who serve on boards and commissions.

Daniel said secretaries of state agencies such as those who oversee health and transportation can sway awards of million-dollar contracts. They potentially have more conflicts of interest than lawmakers, he said.

The House voted 85-14 for the heavily altered House Bill 730 and shipped it to the Senate, where tough sledding is expected.

“I’m still holding out hope there will be a chance to have something that goes through the entire process,” said Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, who sponsored HB730.

Jackson and bill co-sponsor Rep. Don Cazayoux, D-New Roads, said it is clear that lawmakers aren’t “comfortable” with the legislation.

Cazayoux said including local officials could jeopardize passage of the measure.

Both Cazayoux and Jackson said they will seek help from senators to strip local government and appointed officials from the bill.

The idea is to expose potential conflicts of interest between government and personal financial dealings.

The legislation is backed by a coalition of 50 Louisiana business and public interest groups called LA Ethics 1. They argue the ethics package would create more confidence in government, which would improve the state’s economic climate.

The legislation started by requiring disclosures from legislators only. But a House committee added six statewide elected officials.

That's the way the bill hit the House floor and before the other officials were added.

"What we are trying to do is shed a little bit of light on the business that we do," said Jackson. "The bill could have been a lot more restrictive. We tried to make it not too burdensome" in reporting requirements.

Under HB730's provisions, financial data would only be reported in general terms – no specific dollar amounts — in two categories, one over \$10,000 and one below. No reporting would be required until the income, property, investment or liability reaches a value of \$5,000.

The idea behind the legislation did not sit well with Jackson's House colleagues.

"Don't you think this legislation is a little overreaching?" asked Rep. Willie Hunter, D-Monroe.

"What does this accomplish from an ethics standpoint?" asked Rep. Danny Martiny, R-Kenner.

Rep. Charlie DeWitt, D-Lecompte, urged the House to "kill this whole mess."

DeWitt said, "For a part-time job your life is already out in front of the public on whatever you do, whatever you say, whatever they can dig up and throw at you."

DeWitt said more than half the members of the LA Ethics 1 group that is lobbying heavily for the legislators disclosure bill "hire lobbyists and try to get money from the state."

Jackson urged House members to defeat expansion of the disclosure requirement to include local government elected officials.

It should be left up to local officials whether they want to adopt the requirement, he said.

The House voted 80-18 to add local officials.

Nobody opposed including appointed officials throughout state government agencies, boards and commissions.

Under other HB730 House changes Louisiana Board of Ethics members would have to file personal financial disclosure reports.

The House also changed the effective date of the legislation to Aug. 15 instead of January

2008.

Rep. Mert Smiley, R-St. Amant, said he wanted all candidates for the legislature in fall elections to have to detail their financial dealings too.