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CABLWire

To Ethics, or Not to Ethics

It's hard to figure out what's really going on with the legislative financial disclosure bill (HB 730) that passed yesterday and is now making its way through the Legislature. At the very least, it's interesting – at the worst, disconcerting.

The bill started out with what many felt was a reasonable balance between providing a level of privacy for lawmakers and giving citizens some idea about their finances with regard to potential conflicts of interest. In committee a couple of things happened: 1) the legislative disclosure was watered down a bit and 2) a much more extensive disclosure requirement was created for all statewide elected officials (except the governor who already has to report).

Then on the House floor lawmakers added a brand new level of disclosure for just about every other elected and appointed official in the state. The result: it passes overwhelmingly by a vote of 85-14. Looks like they're getting tough on ethics, right? Don't count on it.

There could be any number of strategies at play, but in passing more far-reaching legislation they also created a lot more opposition to it by making a lot more enemies in the form of most elected officials.

So what does that all mean? Now, the House is "on record" for sweeping financial disclosure – even though many members clearly don't have an appetite for it when it relates to their own business – and the bill is on its way to the Senate. And that just may be the point. The truth is, this kind of thing happens with ethics legislation all the time.

Last year the Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill to close the loophole that allows lobbyists to give legislators free tickets to sporting and cultural events. Is it because that's what they really wanted? Doubtful. They just decided to make the popular vote in support of the bill and then let the House kill it – which it did. Is the House's action yesterday on the disclosure bill just another quid pro quo to the Senate? Likely. Granted, this is perhaps a cynical view, though one based on past history. Term limits and election year politics may have actually spurred lawmakers to tackle difficult ethics issues that they have avoided before. It's possible.

But if one were to bet on something, you might want to bet on this: there are many more twists in the road for this bill and you can expect the unexpected. The majority of legislators who spoke on it in the House didn't seem to take it very seriously. It got little vocal support except from the authors who are trying their best to pass as good a piece of legislation as they possibly can.

But don't interpret 85 votes in favor of financial disclosure as a sudden change of heart in the Legislature. The bill wouldn't look the way it does, with virtually all elected and appointed officials added, if that were the case. Instead, look at this as passing the buck to the other chamber and another avoidance of serious discussion about legislative financial disclosure. Times may have changed. It's not inconceivable. But, there's no real evidence of it yet.