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Statewide officials lead ethics move

At the beginning of the current legislative session, LA Ethics 1 geared its drive for greater government accountability to members of the Legislature. The coalition of 50 business and public-interest groups felt that going beyond that battle would be tackling too much in one session. That has changed because of a development that, due to past attitudes, was extremely surprising.

Holders of statewide offices are in favor of the effort to pass ethics laws designed to position Louisiana as a state known for honest, transparent and accountable government - and expressed support for applying the laws to their own offices.

In response, LA Ethics 1 moved quickly to expand its effort to include statewide office holders.

The expression of support by Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, Secretary of State Jay Dardenne, state treasurer John Kennedy and Commissioner of Insurance Jim Donelon is encouraging. As of this writing, Attorney General Charles Foti and Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom had not been reached for comment.

The attitude of the statewide officials should have a strong effect on legislators as they consider laws strengthening ethics rules. The officials not only encourage application of the rules to themselves, but are also open to stronger measures than those proposed for members of the Legislature.

If the changes occur, the statewide officials would be subject to the same rules as the executive branch. Governors, as well as gubernatorial candidates, are required to file disclosure statements regarding such things as sources of income, assets and liabilities and property owned.

There is now a bill, House Bill 730, that would make this happen.

The statewide officials who have expressed support for the bill, as well as LA Ethics 1, which is pushing the issue, deserve the gratitude and respect of Louisiana citizens. We could be seeing the beginning of a new era in government.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco learned quickly as she began meeting with company officials in an effort to lure business and industry to the state that governmental ethics play a significant role in industrial inducement.

One CEO of an out-of-state company told her that many companies have avoided Louisiana for so long that "they now do it by reflex."

Louisiana has been ranked fifth from the bottom by the Center for Public Integrity in terms of openness about how legislators earn their money and how their personal business may conflict with their public decisions. Legislators, like statewide officials, must embrace stronger disclosure laws. When that happens, the demeaning references to Louisiana as a "banana republic" may finally end.

Despite the admirable attitude of statewide officials and the hard work of LA Ethics 1, stronger disclosure laws will not glide through the Legislature. It will take a lot of pushing. The public should participate vigorously in the effort by letting lawmakers know they want Louisiana to be known for honest, transparent and accountable government.