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## **Glass pockets bills may break from amendment stuffing**

Nearly 30 years ago, then state Sen. Ned Randolph, who later became Alexandria's mayor, made headlines when he proposed a "glass pockets" bill.

It died quickly in the state Senate, of course, where only a handful of good-government senators dared vote for it.

Two years ago, Gov. Kathleen Blanco proposed a glass pockets bill for legislators, urging that lawmakers should be subject to the same requirements as the governor and candidates for governor in disclosing sources of income and ranges of amounts. She couldn't even find a legislator who was willing to file the bill.

After all, this is a Legislature that operates a government-by-special-interests: insurance agents serve on the insurance committee, farmers on the agriculture committee, all in the name of putting folks who know something about a subject matter in place to influence laws.

Then along came Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the state's reputation for political corruption took center stage in Washington and around the country. Around the country, folks were openly talking about sleazy Louisiana politicians. Most folks still think all politicians are for sale, or at least for rent, around here, even though we have had two governors, Blanco and Mike Foster, who have run clean administrations.

Foster did have the little matter of his \$20,000 Ethics Administration fine for failing to report paying ex-Klansman

David Duke \$150,000 in return for his mailing list and endorsement in the 1995 governor's race. Then there was the fact that his son's law firm tripled its business with the state. Blanco's administration has been scandal-free until the recent federal investigation of alleged payoffs in the movie film industry tax program.

But those investigations are rather run-of-the-mill sort of things, nothing like charging for gambling licenses that sent former Gov. Edwin Edwards to prison. Or the late public safety commissioner George D'Artois of Shreveport, implicated in the murder of a whistleblower.

This year, glass pockets legislation has gained legs.

The primary reason is the formation of LaEthics1 ([www.laethics1.com](http://www.laethics1.com)), founded by the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce and 51 other state chambers, business and civic groups, that have made income disclosure a top priority.

As originally envisioned, the requirement to disclose sources of income would have applied only to the 144 members of the Legislature and nine statewide elected officials, and candidates for those offices.

Just that requirement alone would take Louisiana from 44th in the country to the top five or so states in income disclosure.

The theory behind income disclosure is that it would be far easier for the public and watchdog groups to see potential conflicts of interest. You would probably see a lot more legislators recusing themselves from voting. The public's right to better government trumps the right to privacy here; if you want to be molding public policy at the state government level — where all the alleged

corruption exists — you ought to be willing to disclose your personal economic interest.

But while bills are pending in both the House and Senate, it's not very popular legislation, and legislators are trying to kill it by overloading it. They are insisting on making it applicable to all 3,000 elected officials in the state, not just the 144 legislators and nine statewide elected officials are envisioned.

This hurts the legislation in two ways:

- Add the 6,000 or whatever number of opponents, and pretty soon you have a very overloaded state Ethics Administration staff that could not keep up with the paper work. It would be weeks, months before all legislative candidates were available.
- The idea behind the requirement is to create opposition throughout the state from local elected officials. That's the status of the House-passed bill, House Bill 730, as it heads for the Senate floor.

The other bill is Senate Bill 157, passed by the Senate this past week, that would require all these 3,000 elected officials to post their federal income tax returns online. That would give everyone access to officials' and, often, their spouses Social Security numbers. This far exceeds what anyone who supports glass pockets legislation thinks is reasonable and becomes an invasion of privacy. No doubt such a requirement would cause many, many people to stay out of trying for a school board or police jury seat.

The Senate bill doesn't stand much of a chance in the House.

But the House-passed bill is on its way to the Senate floor — with the requirement that it apply statewide immediately.

Overkill is a word that comes to mind here. The reason the Legislature should step up to the plate here and make income disclosure for legislators and statewide elected officials and candidates for their offices a priority, leaving the locals out for the time being at least, was articulated this past week by Jim Bernhard, a mega-successful Baton Rouge businessman.

Bernhard is founder and CEO of The Shaw Group, one of two fortune 500 companies headquartered in Louisiana.

He frequently has to meet on Wall Street to finance projects in the hundreds of millions and billions range.

Every single time, there is an inevitable crack about corrupt Louisiana state government, Bernhard told senators. Not often, but every time.

Requiring legislators, statewide elected officials and candidates for those offices to disclose their sources of income would take Louisiana to the top tier of ethics legislation in the nation.

The Louisiana Economic Development Department could use that as a sales tool to counter business' fear of investing in Louisiana because of its lingering reputation for political payoffs, Bernhard said. Louisiana Public Affairs Research Council President Jim Brandt said he would rather the full Senate put House Bill 730 back in its original form applying only to state legislators and statewide elected officials.

"That's where the real issue is — those who hold statewide office and legislative seats, not school board members in Bunkie," Brandt said. It will be difficult to enforce a bill that applies to all 3,000 elected officials throughout the state, he said.

"This bill as amended though is better than nothing at all, and that's what we have now," Brandt said.

If you want to voice an opinion on this legislation, call your state senator at (225) 342-2040 Monday morning.

(John Hill)