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The Advocate

## **Senate tweaks ethics bill**

### **Changed income disclosure legislation goes back to House**

The Louisiana Senate decided Wednesday that legislators and other elected officials should have to disclose more detailed information about their personal finances.

The Senate voted 38-0 for the House-passed disclosure bill after altering it to require legislators and most local elected officials to give a better idea of the financial relationships of public officials.

The idea is to shed the light on where potential conflicts of interest may lie between officials' personal finances and government positions through the reporting of income, debts, investments, property ownership and the like.

As it considered House Bill 730, the Senate also eliminated part-time elected officials in communities of under 5,000 population from the reporting, but left other elected local officials in the bill.

The move puts the Senate at odds with the House. Senators want more specific information revealed than their colleagues across the hall.

It's now the House's turn to decide whether to accept Senate changes or send the bill to a conference committee to iron out differences.

The disclosure bill is the cornerstone of governmental ethics package pushed by LA Ethics 1, a coalition of business and public interest groups trying to improve the state's national image for economic development purposes.

The House version required reporting in two ranges below \$10,000 and above \$10,000. Senators said the ranges provided little information.

The Senate expanded the reporting to 10 categories; patterning it after the form the U.S. Congress uses.

The ranges start at not more than \$1,000 and end at greater than \$5 million. Other ranges include such categories as \$50,000 to \$100,000 and \$100,000 to \$500,000.

"It's my last attempt to strengthen a very weak bill," state Sen. Rob Marionneau, D-Grosse Tete, told senators as he proposed the change.

Marionneau said the public wants “more meaningful reporting” than the coalition wants to see adopted.

“This is an attempt to be somewhere in between my bill and diluted reporting,” said Marionneau.

Marionneau is the sponsor of separate legislation that would require officials to file federal income tax returns. It is scheduled to be heard in a House committee today.

Sen. Ann Duplessis, D-New Orleans, who handled HB730 on the Senate floor, objected to the change. She said the House-passed bill would provide “good disclosure” and help move the state into the top ten nationally in surveys judging the strength of ethics laws.

Duplessis said what Marionneau wanted “is much, much more intrusive into your private affairs.”

The Senate voted 18-17 for the change.

Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth, said the House-passed reporting levels of below \$10,000 and above \$10,000 would only bring more questions upon legislators and other elected officials covered by the disclosure bill.

“When you check off a box more than \$10,000, it’s like a teaser,” said McPherson. “The public is going to demand to know what you made when those sources of income are suspect.”

Sen. Butch Gautreaux, D-Morgan City, said Baton Rouge Area Chamber lobbyists — leaders in LA Ethics 1 — were sending notes to senators urging the stripping of Marionneau’s change because it’s “too tough.”

“I’m disappointed at these folks talking about reform that now seem to back away,” said Gautreaux.

“I’m uncomfortable, but we have a bill that does something,” said Gautreaux.

In an interview after the vote, Chamber president Stephen Moret said the coalition did not think lawmakers would go along with the more in-depth reporting requirement. He said the original legislation proposed more financial categories of reporting but the House scaled it down. The test is going to be in the House which must accept or reject the Senate changes. “We may be able to get a stronger bill than we thought,” Moret said.

Here’s how the Senate voted when it approved 18-17 the expansion of personal financial reporting categories for legislators and local elected officials,

FOR the expansion (18) — Sens. Amedee, Boasso, Cravins, Dupre, Ellington, B. Gautreaux, N. Gautreaux, Heitmeier, Hollis, Lentini, Malone, Marionneaux, McPherson, Murray, Romero, Schedler, Smith and Theunissen.

AGAINST the expansion (17) — President Hines and Sens. Adley, Bajoie, Broome, Cain, Cheek, Duplessis, Fields, Fontenot, Jackson, Kostelka, Michot, Mount, Nevers, Quinn, Shepherd and Ullo.

NOT VOTING (4) — Sens. Barham, Cassidy, Chaisson and Jones.

(Marsha Shuler)