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### **Ethics measure on thin ice**

Financial disclosure bill needs compromise Wednesday, June 27, 2007

BATON ROUGE -- Politicians fearing forced disclosure of their personal financial information could get a reprieve unless a panel of representatives and senators can come up with a compromise that passes muster in both chambers before the Legislature adjourns Thursday.

The prospects didn't seem bright Tuesday as Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, criticized Senate changes to his House Bill 730 and persuaded his colleagues to force the matter to a conference committee to reconcile differences. Jackson said he wants a bill that reflects the version the House adopted 88-13 earlier this month.

In the Senate, meanwhile, the author of the amendments at issue said he's equally fond of the version that won the upper chamber's unanimous approval last week. "I'm not going to let them make it weaker," said Sen. Rob Marionneaux Jr., D-Livonia

The key disputes concern who must disclose; how much information certain officials, including legislators, must give about their sources of income; and the numerical ranges in which filers would report income, assets and liabilities. A conference committee would have the freedom to address other aspects of the bill, potentially offering enough members in either chamber reason to vote against whatever compromise is presented.

That threatens the principal ethics overhaul measure on this year's legislative agenda. Debate during the session has revolved around finding an acceptable balance between the public's presumed right to identify potential conflicts of interest for those who control the public purse, while maintaining an acceptable level of privacy for elected officials.

Failure would push the matter off to next year's Legislature, which because of term limits will include scores of new lawmakers. Advocates for the change had hoped that the current crop of veteran lawmakers would be willing to approve new disclosure requirements knowing they wouldn't have to comply with them.

The House would require disclosure by statewide elected officials and candidates; all appointed officials such as cabinet secretaries and department heads; and more than 3,000 local elected officials around the state. The Senate stripped out all appointed officials except members of the state Ethics Board and that panel's general counsel.

The upper chamber also exempted local officials in municipalities with 5,000 or fewer people.

There are no differences in what information the two chambers would seek from statewide filers. People in that category would have to comply with disclosure requirements that currently apply only to the governor and gubernatorial candidates, who must report their income, assets and most liabilities in six broad ranges.

All others included in the House version would have to list their income and some assets and liabilities in just two categories: above \$10,000 or below \$10,000. They would have to include "brief" descriptions of their income sources.

The Senate adopted Marionneaux amendments to mandate "detailed" descriptions of income sources and to impose 10 numerical reporting ranges, which would give a much more specific picture of a filer's net worth. But the Senate also included more exceptions in the liability category.

Jackson told his colleagues Tuesday that he wants clarification on Marionneaux's change to the description of income sources. Jackson said the Senate language is vague. "I don't know what 'details' they are looking for," he said.

Marionneaux said the House's word of choice -- "brief" -- is equally vague and would make it easier for officials to obscure the true nature of their income, thus evading the very purpose of disclosure.

The senator said he would consider fewer reporting ranges, but said he could not endorse the House version, which he called "a joke." Jackson would say only that he considers the distinction between "brief" and "detailed" to be of greater concern than reporting ranges.

Jackson expressed no reservations about senators' exempting officials in Louisiana's smallest political jurisdictions. Legislators currently report only income of more than \$250 derived from the state; its political subdivisions such as parishes, towns and school boards; or gambling interests. There are no reporting requirements for local officials.

(Bill Barrow)