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### **Ethics reform barely started**

The overwhelming margin by which the Louisiana Legislature has watered down or rejected "glass pockets" legislation in its current form should tell us this: If you're hungry for government reform, expect only thin gruel to be served up this session.

That's not to say that the effort launched at session's start was not high minded or that lawmakers who roundly rejected the present ethics package Tuesday are ethically suspect. In fact, there were some very fine people who said no to the Senate-amended package, and for good reasons. The reform effort simply lost steam during the course of the session.

In fact, the outcome for this effort, which would have among other things required stiff income-source disclosure by state elected officials, was plain weeks ago. Lawmakers widened the scope of the legislation to include local officials. Predictably, local officials all over the state found reason to dislike the bill. Their voices were heard.

Now the amended package, which was rejected 94-1 this week, will head to conference. No one should expect that what will emerge from this already compromised package will be stronger.

That's too bad for Louisianans, who sorely need an enhanced ethical image for their state government. Our tarnished image is a recurring problem to those from outside Louisiana's borders. Crooked lawmakers make for entertaining legends in these parts - everyone has an Edwin Edwards joke - but the humor doesn't translate well once you cross state lines. That's especially true when it comes to out-of-state investors.

Baton Rouge business leaders and good government groups advanced this year's reform effort, and they made a fine effort at enlisting support. Their aims were lofty; they wanted to move Louisiana from the bottom tier to the top in government ethics laws and in ethics enforcement. That was ambitious in the current climate; the current crop of state elected officials was not elected on the platform that the business leaders were promoting.

Still, the pieces of the ethics package - it included rigorous financial disclosure, strengthened public records laws, mandatory government ethics training, a full-time ethics administrator and more citizen access to records - were laudable, if not imminently doable.

One should not see failure in those well-intentioned efforts. Those who promoted the ethics package ought to look ahead. The attractive pieces of the ethics package ought to

become part of the 2007 political campaign, when voters themselves can hold would-be state leaders to the ethics test.

Would your candidates embrace more stringent income reporting standards? Do they want citizens to have more access to public records? If not, why not?

This effort is not over. It has barely started.