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The Advocate

House bounces changes to ethics bill

The fate of a proposed law that would require legislators and other Louisiana elected officials to file annual personal financial disclosure reports is in limbo with a Thursday session deadline approaching.

The state House voted 94-1 to reject Senate changes to the governmental ethics reform bill.

It now goes to a House-Senate committee that will try to iron out a compromise.

House Bill 730's sponsor state Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, assured the House he would try to negotiate a compromise that would "make sense, that's meaningful, that takes into consideration our privacy" while providing the public enough information to instill trust.

Rep. William Daniel, R-Baton Rouge, sought an open conference committee meeting. He said sunshine is required on ethics legislation "of this magnitude."

Jackson gave no assurances that deliberations would be public.

The legislation is designed to allow the public to see where potential conflicts of interest lie between their elected officials and their government positions.

It covers legislators, all statewide elected officials and candidates for those offices. HB730 also would cover local elected officials.

The financial disclosure bill is the major piece of a legislative package pushed by LA Ethics 1 as a way to improve the state's national image for economic development recruitment efforts. LA Ethics 1 is a coalition of some 50 business and public interest organizations.

Also Tuesday, the House:

Gave final legislative approval to another coalition bill, House Bill 493, mandating ethics education training for all elected and appointed officials as well as government employees by 2012. The House voted 83-1 to accept Senate changes that phased in the mandate called for in the bill by Rep. Regina Barrow, D-Baton Rouge.

Shipped Daniel's House Bill 532 ending outside employment of the chief ethics attorney to a conference committee in a dispute over when the change would go into effect.

Jackson asked his House colleagues to reject the Senate-version of HB730 - the financial disclosure bill - saying its requirement for "detailed" reporting raised concerns.

"I think we need an opportunity to take a strong look at this and get it correct," Jackson said.

The Legislature should not leave it up to state ethics officials to interpret "detailed reporting" when they develop the forms, Jackson said.

"We should not be trying to create more opportunities for Ethics to question what we are doing," he said.

Jackson said he's also troubled by reporting ranges approved by the Senate, which provide more financial information than the House wanted.

The House-passed bill would have required reporting of income, debts and other financial dealings in two ranges: one below \$10,000 and the other above \$10,000.

The Senate version requires reporting in ten different financial ranges - similar to that done today by Congress. The ranges start at below \$1,000 and end above \$5 million.

In an interview, Jackson said he thinks a compromise can be developed somewhere in between.

"We need to be careful we don't put an onerous burden on people running for office and we're not running people away from running for the Legislature or other local offices," said Rep. Kay Katz, R-Monroe.

House members told Jackson they also want to try to include candidates for local elected offices - not just local government officials in the reporting requirement. Jackson said he would bring that up in negotiations.

Candidates for legislative office are already included in the bill.

Daniel said he hoped that disagreements over financial brackets for reporting would not lead to "something less than desirable coming out or nothing at all."

The only area that is not getting legislative resistance is HB730's expansion of personal financial reporting to encompass all statewide elected officials. Today, the governor and candidates for that office must file reports on income, debts, and other financial dealings.

The bill would extend the same reporting requirement to the six other statewide officeholders - lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general, treasurer and commissioners of insurance and agriculture.

(Marsha Shueller)