

July 4, 2007
The Advocate

Reformers Gird for Fall

Local businessmen say their push to shine more light on the personal finances of elected officials would become a key issue in this fall's elections.

Stephen Moret, a leader in the LA Ethics 1 coalition, said proponents of expanded financial disclosure would demand candidates in the fall to declare themselves on the issue. A bill requiring financial disclosure died in the final hours of the 2007 Legislature.

But Moret, also president of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, said business leaders would back candidates for the state Legislature and for governor who back the adoption of a legislative disclosure law and more "ethics reforms" come 2008.

The LA Ethics 1 coalition of business and public interest groups will be getting some new help. Another group of businessmen and civic leaders also want to make disclosure one of its five major campaign issues in the fall.

Blueprint Louisiana will have several million dollars to push a fall election agenda that includes governmental ethics reform, said Sean Reilly, an organizer. Reilly said the group is conducting workshops around the state in recent months as it decides the issues.

"Glass pockets financial disclosure ranks one or two at every single workshop, so clearly it is an issue for voters and citizens of this state," he said.

Reilly said Blueprint will be asking candidates to sign onto specific legislation and then supporting those that do sign with an advertising campaign.

The work that Moret's group did during the 2007 session "teed it up" for the election season to come, Reilly said.

The election emphasis comes on the heels of the death of a proposed financial disclosure law — the major initiative in LA Ethics 1's legislative package aimed at improving the state's national image.

House Bill 730 started out as a bill to require legislators and legislative candidates to generally disclose income, assets, liabilities and other financial dealings and in broad ranges.

Along the way, lawmakers added statewide and local elected officials as well as state Ethics Board members. The House and Senate signed off on including all the officials,

which meant locals, like mayors and police jurors, would have to report their income sources and creditors.

Legislators then squabbled over how detailed the disclosures should be: senators favored more disclosure, representatives less.

When they failed to agree on the extent of disclosure, a committee of three representatives and three senators were named to iron out the differences.

But HB730 stalled when two negotiators on the Senate side – Senate President Don Hines, D-Bunkie, and Sen. Robert Adley, D-Benton – threw up a roadblock. They refused to sign-off on any bill that included local officials, even though both the full House and the full Senate had agreed on that part of the provision and only disagreed on how much information to disclose.

The House refused to approve HB730 absent the local officials. Instead, with about three hours left in the legislative session, they asked the negotiators to try again, a move that destined the bill to failure.

State Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, sponsored HB730. He said he'd try again next year.

“It takes a little time to get a bill like that through the process,” said Jackson. “There will be a new Legislature.”

Jackson said there should be a new strategy too — the filing of one bill for legislative disclosure and another for local elected officials.

The leaders of public interest groups said the last-minute defeat didn't come as too much of a surprise.

“There was no appetite for financial disclosure from the very beginning,” said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council.

The 2007 Legislature's failure to approve the legislative disclosure bill makes the issue more potent in the fall elections, Brandt said.

Council for a Better Louisiana president Barry Erwin said he and other proponents feared from the start that legislators “would find a way to cast votes to show they were in favor of disclosure and find a way to kill it at the same time.”

And that's exactly what happened, Erwin said. The Baton Rouge chamber's Moret said getting the next governor on board early would help pass disclosure legislation during the 2008 legislative session.

“If Louisiana elects a governor that makes it a priority it will happen next year,” said Moret.