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Top Ethics Lawyer Quits

Gray Sexton resigned as the state's chief ethics lawyer Thursday, ending a four-decade career in policing state conflict of interest laws.

Sexton said he decided to step down rather than comply with a new law that would require him to disclose his private legal clients.

The Louisiana Board of Ethics accepted Sexton's resignation, which takes effect immediately.

The Ethics Board then voted to seek civil service approval for a part-time position, which Sexton would fill to help with a transition to a new ethics chief. The board oversees state ethics and campaign finance laws.

The board also named ethics lawyer Kathleen Allen as interim ethics administrator. Allen was in the No. 2 job.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco signed into law on Wednesday a measure that would forbid Sexton from having outside clients after Aug. 15, 2008. During the interim, the law would require Sexton to file quarterly reports disclosing work done for private clients.

Sexton said disclosing his private client's business could violate his code as a lawyer.

"The smart thing to do is to resign," Sexton said in an interview.

Sexton, 65, has practiced law since 1966.

His private law practice is mainly in the area of commercial litigation and construction law with some estate planning, wills and trusts and family law cases.

One of Sexton's clients is Baton Rouge contractor Lane Grigsby, whose involvement in local political campaigns has prompted ethics complaints.

One of the filers of those complaints, state Rep. William Daniel, R-Baton Rouge, sponsored the legislation banning the ethics administrator from outside employment.

House Bill 532 was part of a package pushed by LA Ethics 1, whose main mover is Baton Rouge Area Chamber president Stephen Moret.

Sexton said he had wanted to stay on to help new board Chairman Hank Perret of Lafayette "and position members of the staff. Unfortunately, the chamber and some

dissident legislators” structured a law to accelerate his leaving.

Daniel said the intent of the legislation was not to spur Sexton’s immediate resignation but to get some level of disclosure.

“I’m torn because I do think it was a conflict of interest,” Daniel said.

The Ethics Board’s attempt to keep Sexton on in a part-time position without the job title “is kind of a backdoor deal. It goes completely against what the Legislature intended. Nobody intended him to stay on in any capacity if he didn’t disclose,” Daniel said.

A provision of the law requires the person holding the title of ethics administrator on its effective date to disclose in a report within 30 days outside clients and the work done for them. The effective date is the day Blanco signed the bill.

Sexton told the board that he had no intention of filing a disclosure statement. He also asked board members if they wanted him to file a report. No one did.

Board member Dolores Spikes of Baton Rouge said the board could catch flak for seeking to keep Sexton on a temporary basis.

“This is in no way to circumvent” the Legislature, Spikes said. “He’s a vital part of some of those things (ethics cases) coming up.”

“There’s a huge election coming up. We are already understaffed,” Perret said, noting Sexton’s “institutional knowledge.”

(Marsha Shuler)