

The Daily Advertiser  
Editorial  
November 9, 2007

### **Ethics reform must target board**

For decades, the administrative and legislative arms of government have preached ethics reform. The rhetoric has been strong, but the results have usually been weak and ineffective.

We have often cited as the main problem the Legislature's inability to change ethics regulations. A study by the Shreveport Times newspaper, however, indicates that all the blame cannot be dumped on the governor and the lawmakers.

A large part of the blame falls on the Louisiana Board of Ethics, although some of the questionable procedures there stem from legislative action.

Ethics boards in other states keep track of complaints received. That isn't done in Louisiana. Also, according to the Times, the board won't reveal details about a complaint or investigation and has not referred a case to the state attorney general in the last five years.

While the board is a public agency, it does most of its business in secret, the Times says. According to the report, a survey of 10 regional and national ethics boards offered "further evidence Louisiana's efforts to police the behavior of legislators and other officials are not effective, and, in some cases, contribute to the state's image as being among the most corrupt in the nation."

Elliott Stonecipher, a political analyst, says limited record-keeping, no annual report and confidential handling of complaints make the board vulnerable to charges of favoritism and political manipulation.

"If the agency is allowed to throw complaints in the trash can and/or pursue them with zero transparency, then you have at best a completely ineffectual apparatus," Stonecipher said. "The point is you have to have checks and balances."

Kathleen Allen, acting ethics administrator, says such things as commenting on complaints or investigations are restricted by law. We can accept that. The Legislature has always found ways to weaken the functions of the board, usually by killing reform measures or amending ethics regulations already on the books.

An example was the defeat this year of the cornerstone of a reform package developed by LA Ethics 1. The intent of the bill was to require legislators to disclose more of their personal finances. The Center for Public Integrity ranks Louisiana fifth from the bottom in

terms of openness about how legislators earn their money and how their personal business may conflict with their public decisions.

Legislators were creative in altering the bill so that failure was assured. They simply extended it so the rules would apply to virtually every state and local elected official in Louisiana, thus creating an overpowering contingent of opponents to the measure.

Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal lists ethics reform among his major objectives. Besides the tough task of getting his package past the Legislature, he must push for changes in the way the ethics board operates.

It won't be easy, but success would mean that the image of Louisiana as a "banana republic" could be changed at last.