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Financial disclosure bill OK'd

House votes 85-14 after fierce debate

BATON ROUGE -- Public officials, from statewide officeholders and political appointees to parish and town council members, would have to disclose new information about their personal finances under a bill the House of Representatives passed 85-14 on Wednesday.

But like the chamber's recent vote to ban cockfighting in Louisiana, the final tally on House Bill 730 was hardly indicative of the preceding debate. For the better part of an hour, lawmakers pounded the sponsors, parsed details of the bill and derided financial disclosure generally as an intrusion into the lives of elected officials who should be trusted to conduct public affairs without such burdensome ethics laws.

The bill now goes to the Senate, where a committee Wednesday approved its own version of legislative disclosure.

Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, Rep. Don Cazayoux, D-New Roads, and Rep. Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, co-sponsored the House bill as a part of an ethics package backed by LA Ethics 1, a consortium of business associations and government watchdog groups that describe their agenda as a way to help Louisiana shed its reputation for shady deals and corruption.

Besides the LA Ethics 1 argument, Jackson and Cazayoux told their colleagues during floor debate that disclosure is simply the right thing to do. "The intent is to give the public an appreciation" of elected officials' primary financial relationships and potential conflicts of interests, Jackson said. "We tried to find the balance between public information and protecting our privacy."

HB 730 began the session applying only to legislators. The House committee that handles ethics legislation added state officials, essentially merging Jackson's proposal with another sponsored by Rep. M.J. "Mert" Smiley, R-St. Amant. The full House adopted amendments adding statewide appointed officials, such as Cabinet secretaries, and all other local officials.

"If it's good enough for us, it's good enough for them," said Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers.

The House also amended the bill to apply to candidates seeking office this fall. The original effective date was Jan. 1, 2008.

Jackson repeatedly deflected assertions that his effort is an unfair attack on legislators' character by harping on the need to assure voters -- and potential industries considering Louisiana as a place to do business -- that the Bayou State isn't what it was under governors such as Huey Long and Edwin Edwards.

"Sometimes perception is reality," Jackson said.

Under the bill, all statewide appointees, officeholders and candidates for those offices would have to comply with disclosure requirements that now apply only to the governor and candidates for that office.

Annual filings with the state Board of Ethics would have to list income, holdings and debts in six broad ranges: less than \$5,000; \$5,000 to \$24,999; \$25,000 to \$49,999; \$50,000 to \$99,999; \$100,000 to \$199,999; and \$200,000 or more. As with the existing requirement for the governor's office, the provisions also would apply to spouses.

All other annual filers, including legislators, would be held to less specific standards, reporting any source of income, property holdings, stock in Louisiana companies, and debts in excess of \$5,000, with some exceptions such as a filer's primary residence and student-loan debt. As with statewide officials, spouses would be included.

Currently, legislators -- but not candidates or local officials -- are required to disclose annual income in excess of \$250 from contracts with the state or its political subdivisions or from gambling interests.

Rep. Danny Martiny, R-Kenner, was among Wednesday's most outspoken critics of more disclosure. He said existing House rules already require a member to file written disclosures when casting a vote that affects the lawmaker financially. Martiny said the bill, rather than help Louisiana's image, would communicate to outsiders: "We're so corrupt we make our officials disclose every minute thing."

Rep. Willie Hunter, D-Monroe, said, "Now I'm for reporting. I'm for disclosure. But tell me now this is not overreaching. . . . Most of us here understand what ethics is all about."

Louisiana's corrupt image is undeserved, Rep. Lelon Kenney, D-Columbia, said. "I don't know a single crook down here. I don't know anybody down here that I would not trust with anything I've got except my wife."

Other critics, including even Hunter at one point, argued that Jackson's bill is not tough enough or at least will not prevent shenanigans by public officials bent on corrupt dealings.

"The bill is not perfect," Jackson said. "But what we wanted to do was shed a little more light on legislators and the kind of business we conduct. . . . And this is in the posture in which we, the members, are willing to accept."

In the upper chamber's version, Senate Bill 157, sponsored by Sen. Rob Marianneaux Jr., D-Livonia, among other provisions, would require the governor, legislators and candidates for those offices to disclose their most recent federal and state tax returns.

(Bill Barrow)