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### **Political ethics: Time to talk**

By noon today, proponents of a package of state ethics bills will know whether their legislation will get a fair hearing Wednesday before the Senate and Governmental Affairs committee. They should, but there is no guarantee they will. That's not to say that the four bills — House bills 340, 493, 532 and 730 — that have moved from the lower chamber to the Senate are flawless. Far from it. After more than a month in the legislative butcher shop, the bills have been carved up and reshaped under a variety of motivations, sometimes to improve them and sometimes not.

Still, the Senate's willingness to discuss matters of ethics seriously may be revealed when the committee's Wednesday agenda is revealed today. Certainly the ethics matters addressed by the four pieces of legislation are serious.

HB 730, the chief piece of legislation, deals with disclosure by state officials. "Disclosure" made the bill a prime target for old-style Louisiana pols who don't want the public to know about possible conflicts of interest they may hold. They want your tax dollars but not your prying eyes.

The other legislation is hardly unscathed as it rises to the upper chamber, but those bills deal with, respectively, whistleblower laws, ethics administration and ethics training. Baton Rouge Area Chamber President Stephen Moret — the chamber is spearheading the ethics reform effort — believes the other bills may have many supporters.

All of the bills make good sense, at least in concept, and their appearance before this Legislature is timely. Louisiana's political reputation, often unsavory, may have hampered the state's efforts to lure new business and industrial investors here, some critics say.

Certainly the state's political reputation has hindered our ability to fully recover from the devastating hurricanes that ravaged our coast in 2005. Some members of Congress have been vocal in their skepticism that federal aid to Louisiana would be honestly and effectively spent. So the timing is right for some ethics discussion.

State lawmakers who are visibly ill at ease with the ethics reform package introduced this session may only exacerbate the contempt that others feel for Louisiana politics. Right now, Moret says, our state's ethics laws are the weakest in the region. Open efforts to undermine this package have not made us stronger. If the Senate sidelines the ethics bills without honest debate, they will send a clear — and wrongheaded — message to the world.

Nonetheless, Moret believes that ethics reform has "won" during this session, regardless

of the final outcome for the individual bills. Expectations for the ethics reform package's success were understandably low — some observers did not believe the bills would escape the House committees — but four have moved to the Senate. The bills have generated much discussion and some public interest.

These bills can be addressed in this session — and current lawmakers can gain some credit for advancing the cause of reform — or they can be waylaid to the next session, with a host of new political figures.

For now, it's up to the Senate.