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## **Senate passes disclosure bill**

### **But lawmakers seem to be of two minds**

BATON ROUGE -- The issue of more personal financial disclosure by state lawmakers and other public officials continued its bruising course through the Legislature, with one measure clearing a Senate committee Wednesday and a competing bill winning approval in the full upper chamber.

Yet like their House counterparts, senators questioned the broad concept and hammered at the details before eventually lending their approval, leaving sponsors guarded about the prospects of either bill actually becoming law in any meaningful configuration.

Ethics reform advocates, organized under the banner of the business-dominated LA Ethics 1, say disclosure would expose potential conflicts of interest, and they have identified new mandates as their top priority during this election-year session.

In a 29-8 vote, the Senate approved a much-amended proposal that would require legislators, all local officeholders and candidates for those offices to disclose their federal income tax returns each year. Senate Bill 157, sponsored by Sen. Rob Marionneaux Jr., D-Livonia, would also bar legislators from entering into professional service contracts with the state or any of its political subdivisions, such as state agencies, parishes, municipalities, school boards or hospital districts.

The proposal, which now moves to the House for further consideration, began requiring only that state lawmakers make public their tax returns. During floor debate, senators' comments alternated between blasting the proposal as intrusive and saying it doesn't go far enough.

Sen. Diana Bajoie, D-New Orleans, fretted about identity theft. Sen. Francis Heitmeier, D-Algiers, jokingly proposed requiring disclosure of tax returns by virtually any lobbyist who talks to a lawmaker.

Sen. Tom Schedler, R-Mandeville, called the idea "insane," but then proposed the amendment banning legislators' contracts with public entities. Marionneaux, an attorney, does business with the school board in Iberville Parish, a fact Schedler said was unrelated to the amendment, which could threaten the sponsor's relationship with the school system.

## **Spouses are included**

Earlier in the day, the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee voted 5-2 to advance an amended version of House Bill 730, sponsored by Reps. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, and Don Cazayoux, D-New Roads. Jackson and Cazayoux first attempted to strip their bill of several amendments added in the House. That would have returned the proposal to an earlier form requiring state lawmakers and legislative candidates to disclose their sources of income in broad categories, while extending existing reporting requirements for the governor's office to all statewide posts and candidates for those positions.

But the plan met the same fate as Marionneaux's bill, with senators echoing an argument heard often since lawmakers convened last month: If disclosure is good for the Legislature, it's good for all elected officials.

Under the latest version, the seven statewide officeholders and candidates would have to submit the annual disclosure forms now used for the governor's office. Filers 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.

Legislators, local officeholders and candidates -- along with spouses -- would have to list income, most holdings and debts in two categories: less than \$10,000 and \$10,000 or more. Those provisions would also apply to members of the state Ethics Board and the general counsel of the Ethics Administration.

## **Effective in 2008**

Senators did comply with the sponsors' wishes to exclude other appointed officials, such as Cabinet secretaries and members of myriad boards and commissions, that had been included in the House-passed version. The committee also agreed to make the law effective Jan. 1, 2008. The House had amended the proposal to go into effect before this fall's elections.

Currently, legislators and their spouses -- 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.

Marionneaux, who sits on the Governmental Affairs Committee, voted for the Jackson-Cazayoux bill, but derided it as weak and loophole-ridden. The Senate bill, Marionneaux said, more directly accomplishes the goal of allowing the public to assess lawmakers' financial ties.

Jackson and Cazayoux said the perceived weakness is in part simply an effort to craft a bill that can pass. They told senators that heaping disclosure requirements on local

officials could threaten the bill, and Jackson indicated after the hearing that he will consider trying again on the Senate floor to strip that provision. But that was before senators amended Marionneaux's bill in the afternoon, and Cazayoux expressed mild bewilderment as to what the mood of the Legislature truly is on the issue.

The two House members speculated that lawmakers could be engaging in a game of political chicken, refusing to kill proposals that few of them like, while quietly hoping to watch them die at some future step in the legislative process.

"We just don't have a strategy yet," Cazayoux said.

(Bill Barrow)