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The Advocate

Sunshine proposals advance, compete

Conflicting proposals aimed at exposing potential conflicts of interest in the business dealings of government officials cleared legislative hurdles Wednesday.

The Senate advanced a bill that would require legislators, statewide officials and those holding locally elected office to make public their federal income tax returns.

Senators complained of the invasion of privacy and that the bill is over-reaching, then voted 29-8 for it.

The bill, Senate Bill 157, now heads to the House.

Meanwhile, the key disclosure bill in a package pushed by a coalition of business and public interest groups headed to a Senate vote.

The House-passed legislation that cleared a Senate panel earlier Wednesday would require that state and locally elected officials file personal financial disclosure reports.

The reports, proposed in House Bill 730, would provide a general idea of officials' sources of income, debts owed, and the like.

The legislation is the cornerstone of a package of bills pushed by LA Ethics 1, a 50-organization coalition working to improve the state's national image to help with business recruitment.

The two measures are headed for a showdown on just how much of elected officials finances should be on public view and which elected officials should be covered.

The inclusion of about 3,000 locally elected officials such as city councilmen, school board members and police jurors in both bills is causing dissent.

Sen. Rob Marionneaux, D-Gross Tete, told senators there are "too many loopholes" in the LA Ethics 1 bill to give the public a good idea of potential conflicts of interest. He said sources of income could remain hidden as well as the extent of business relationships.

Marionneaux said his SB157 requiring release of federal income tax returns "goes much further and adds much more sunshine."

The coalition-backed disclosure bill would require legislators and locally elected officials to report their financial status in general terms with no specific dollar amounts - just in categories of over or below \$10,000.

And no reporting would be required until the income, property, investment or liability hit \$5,000.

State Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, said the House bill he's sponsoring is an effort to balance elected official's privacy with the public's right to know about potential conflicts between their public position and private business dealings.

Jackson predicted "a dogfight" on the Senate floor.

LA Ethics 1 official Stephen Moret said Marionneaux's bill would provide less information and could reduce the number of people running for public office because it is so intrusive.

The disclosure debate started as the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee considered the coalition-backed HB730.

Before approving HB730, the panel eliminated financial disclosure requirements for appointed officials - a provision added by the House. There would be one exception, appointed members of the Louisiana Board of Ethics and its administrator.

Jim Bernhard, CEO of the Louisiana-based international Shaw Group, testified for the bill, saying its passage will be helpful in state business development efforts.

"It is a huge economic disadvantage to have a poor image," he said.

Passage of the bill will demonstrate "openness and fair play, that everybody has got a chance," Bernhard said.

Marionneaux's federal tax return bill drew quick Senate floor opposition.

"This bill just says 'let me see your tax return,' " Sen. Ann Duplessis, D-New Orleans, said. "It's nobody's business how you make your money if it's legal and warranted based on your expertise."

Sen. Diana Bajoie, D-New Orleans, and others said they were concerned about identity theft by disclosure of tax forms that include Social Security numbers, date of birth and other identifying data.

Sen. Tom Schedler, R-Mandeville, said a better course would be reporting income, debts and other financial information in a variety of financial ranges similar to what the governor and congressmen do today.

Marionneaux said his bill "may go too far." But he said the alternative proposal to report income and other data in two categories under \$10,000 and over \$10,000 - is too weak.

(Marsha Shuler)