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Lawmakers continue to push ethics legislation

Efforts to improve disclosure of lobbyists' dealings with the Legislature are dead for the 2007 legislative session, but other ethics bills are still in the pipeline.

The lobbyist-reporting bill became a casualty in LA Ethics 1's efforts to improve Louisiana's conflict-of-interest laws and along the way the state's national image.

"It was a very ambitious goal to push through all the ethics legislation they presented," said Rep. Joel Robideaux, I-Lafayette, who sponsored House Bill 733, a lobbyist disclosure bill.

The top priority for the coalition of 50 business and public-interest groups is passing legislation to require lawmakers and other elected officials to disclose more of their personal finances, said Baton Rouge Area Chamber President Stephen Moret, a top LA Ethics 1 official.

The lobbyist-disclosure bill would have taken efforts away from that, he said.

"We didn't feel we would be able to fight two wars at the same time," Moret said. "We felt if we continued to push that bill with the other bills some lobbyists would work to kill the whole package."

HB733 has been sitting on the House calendar for more than a month.

A similar bill, Senate Bill 163 by Sen. Jodi Amedee, D-Gonzales, has not had its first hearing in the Senate.

Both measures would have required registered lobbyists to electronically file reports of their business dealings with legislators and on a more timely basis, as well as disclose the subject matter they are lobbying.

"They were surprised about the amount of push-back they have gotten on all the bills, especially so much on the lobbyist financial disclosure," Robideaux said.

He said the lobbyist-disclosure legislation could have passed the House, in spite of opposition from many in the lobbying community.

The lobbyist-disclosure initiative is one of six issues for which LA Ethics 1 got lawmakers to file legislation during the current session and was one of two initiatives that stalled in the Legislature.

The other initiative, House Bill 442 and Senate Bill 85, would have created a type of ombudsman in the attorney general's office to mediate disputes over public records.

Meanwhile, four of the six ethics agenda items are moving through the legislative process.

House Bill 730 by Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, which started out dealing only with legislative financial disclosure, has morphed into a measure requiring reports to be filed by all statewide and local elected officials. The House-passed HB730 awaits action by the Louisiana Senate.

Last week, the full Senate approved Senate Bill 157 by Sen. Rob Marionneaux, D-Grosse Tete. His bill — an alternative measure that is not part of the ethics package — would require all officials in the state to make public their personal federal income tax returns.

Moret said his coalition thinks “there’s a good shot” that Jackson’s House bill will make it through the legislative process. Moret said he also expects some “unfriendly” changes to be proposed when the bill comes up in the Senate. The coalition would prefer that the legislation not encompass local elected officials this year, “but if that’s where it ends up, we won’t oppose that,” Moret said.

About two-thirds of the Southern states require local elected officials to file personal financial disclosure reports, he said.

The Jackson bill would require legislators and local elected officials to file annual reports that provide general information about their sources of income, debts, property ownership, investments and the like. The reporting would be in two categories — below \$10,000 per item per year and above \$10,000 per item per year. No reporting would be required unless income, debts or other reportable categories exceed \$5,000 a year.

HB730 also includes statewide elected officials, who would have to file reports similar to those currently required for the governor and candidates for governor. Those reports require more specific information than is proposed for lawmakers and local elected officials. The annual reporting is done in financial ranges: the lowest is less than \$5,000 and the highest \$200,000 or more.

The three other bills in the LA Ethics 1 package that are nearing final legislative approval would:

- Mandate education and training of elected officials on ethics and campaign finance laws in an effort to stop inadvertent violations.
- Require governmental agencies to post whistleblower protection laws.
- Stop the Louisiana Board of Ethics chief administrator from having outside employment. The idea is to prevent potential conflicts of interest. The current administrator Gray Sexton is a lawyer with an outside practice.

(Marsha Shuller)