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## **Making Laws Too Good to Pass**

Nearing the end of this legislative session, the halls of the state Capitol are killing fields, bone piles stacked high with the vast majority of bills filed at the start. With many more ways to kill a bill than to pass one, one time-honored technique is to improve an instrument so much that it fails by its own weight.

That could be what's going on, in different ways, with two disparate causes: banning cockfighting and requiring lawmakers to disclose their financial information.

There are few legislators left who will admit to wanting to see the blood sport of roosters fighting to the death continue indefinitely. Even the High Executioner of past ban bills, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, declares he is committed to ending the practice. It is said to be just a matter of when, whether this August, December or August 2008, according to different bills and their amendments.

Yet, the cockpits could be counting down their last derbies had Sen. Art Lentini, R-Kenner, and his animal rights allies shown interest in a compromise last year to give breeders and suppliers a year or so to get out of the business. But by refusing to accommodate the abomination, they are looking at possibly 14 more months of carnage, by a bill the House passed, or, still a possibility, losing both bills and having to start over again next year.

Even with more momentum behind the ban this year, its more ardent supporters risk the same fate as last year by quibbling over a matter of months and adding complicating details to perfect the bill. Lobbyist Charlie Smith, who was hired by Humane Society U.S. but who didn't drink all the Kool-Aid, best made the case for compromise when he told a committee, "A ban in the hand is better than two birds in the bush."

Cockfighting opponents, if overly zealous, at least are sincere. It's harder to ascribe the motives of all those working to improve the bills for income disclosure bill for public officials.

Backed by about 50 chambers of commerce and public interest groups, Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, introduced a reasonably ground-breaking bill to have legislators annually disclose sources and amounts of income, assets and debts in broad ranges, under and over \$10,000. The idea is to give the public an idea of possible conflicts of interests with the least invasion of privacy.

Good, but not enough, decided a House committee, which extended the requirement to all state and locally elected officials. The share-the-pain argument is hard to refute in

principle, but also makes the bill easier to kill, once addled sheriffs and police jurors weigh in on the matter.

Besides potential new opposition from local officials, Jackson's bill, now in the Senate, has competition there. That body has passed a more far-reaching disclosure bill by Sen. Rob Marionneaux, D-Livonia, that requires all legislators, statewide and locally elected officials to publicly file copies of their federal and state income tax returns.

With both bills moving, ethics proponents are hopeful but paranoid. They fear both instruments could become entangled in a dispute between the Senate and the House over who's stronger on ethics and that the session could end without either bill having passed. Members of both chambers could then claim they voted for the stronger sunshine law but that the craven bunch in the other house did not see the light.

The most reasonable course would be for both houses to adopt a version of Rep. Jackson's bill, leading by example in requiring financial disclosure of themselves and statewide officials. When the sky doesn't fall, they can come back next year and include local officials. But the stakes, including the state's national reputation, are much higher at the state level, and so income disclosure should start there.

The chance of that happening is not fat. Given the Legislature's urge to improve good bills to death, cockfighters could have more hope of doing business as usual next year than lawmakers should fear having to change theirs.