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Do ethics-bill backers plan failure?

There is one body that may be more effective than the Louisiana Legislature at diminishing the effectiveness of or killing good ethics bills. That's the U.S. House of Representatives, which last week cobbled together a new ethics department supposedly independent of the House Ethics Committee. A close reading, however, says findings of the "independent" department must go to the House panel, which can deep-six them. Webster's definition of "independent" is different from that of our Congress.

The Louisiana Legislature, meanwhile, has slipped the skids under a new disclosure measure that was supposed to provide regulations for legislators and public officials elected statewide. The plan to scuttle the bill is creative. Lawmakers simply extended it so the rules would apply to virtually every state and local elected official in Louisiana. Sounds good at first glance, but the intent is to create an overpowering contingent - thousands of opponents - to shoot the bill down.

An honorable attempt was made in the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee to return the measure, House Bill 730, to its original form - focusing only on legislators and statewide elected officials. The effort failed. The bill went forward with the thousands of add-on public officials onboard - and angry about it.

The Council for a Better Louisiana said the maneuvering was "almost comical if it weren't so serious." The bill is moving, so there is a chance it could pass. A more likely scenario, as we see it, is a massive assault by the thousands of office holders who were not part of the original bill. Ideally, lawmakers would give in, and the bill would end up as it was, with only legislators and statewide elected officials subject to its disclosure rules. We don't expect the ideal. Either the bill will be shot down or, if passed, prove impossible to enforce. Such creative games assure that Louisiana continues to rank fifth from the bottom in terms of openness about how legislators earn their money and how their personal business may conflict with their public decisions.

Here's another one that has jumped the track. The House Appropriations Committee took steps to mandate more accountability for public funds earmarked by legislators for nonprofit organizations. The bill looked good. It would require a detailed application describing how the money was used. There is, however, a significant problem. The House clerk says such applications are privileged and not public record. That seems to strip the accountability bill of any worthwhile path toward true accountability.

There are people in government who are sincere about more meaningful disclosure regulations, but they are too few in number. There is a cure for that political ailment. Positive change will occur if voters and taxpayers join those well-intentioned officials

who sincerely want stronger ethics laws. Without us, theirs will continue to be a lonely, losing battle.