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The Advocate

Agreement sets vote today on ethics bill

Lawmakers have struck a deal and are expected to vote today on an ethics bill that would require elected officials to disclose more of their personal finances, according to a member of the negotiating panel.

State Rep. Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, one of the negotiators on House Bill 730, said that under the agreement, officials would file personal financial disclosure reports in broader financial ranges than that proposed by the House but not as in-depth as the Senate wanted.

Negotiators will recommend that the officials report income, liabilities and other financial dealings in three ranges: from zero to \$9,999; \$10,000 to \$49,999; and \$50,000 or more, LaFleur said.

When HB730 passed the House, only two reporting categories were required: under \$10,000 and over \$10,000.

The Senate expanded to 10 reporting categories, which were aligned similar to those required of the U.S. Congress: starting with less than \$1,000 and topping out at more than \$5 million.

The proposal must be ratified by the House and Senate before the session ends at 6 p.m. today or the financial disclosure bill dies.

HB730, sponsored by Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, is the major bill in a package pushed by LA Ethics 1. The group is a coalition of business and public interest groups working to improve governmental ethics laws and the state's national image.

They want to show where potential conflicts of interest lie between the personal lives of elected officials and their public positions.

HB730 started out covering legislators. But along the way lawmakers added all the officials statewide and local as well, including mayors, councils, police juries and school boards.

"The bill is a lot broader than what we started with. We were trying to take some baby steps with it. But at the end of the day we added more people to it and more categories" of financial reporting, LaFleur said.

The conference committee of three state representatives and three senators discussed whether local elected officials should be required to file the annual financial reports.

In the end, conferees decided they should stay in, LaFleur said. “Some of the local officials make more than legislators make and their boards enter into contracts all the time,” he said.

(Marsha Shuler)