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The Advocate

Ethics bill dies after dispute

An attempt to require legislators to disclose more of their personal finances died Thursday, the victim of a last-minute dispute that led the House to scuttle the whole idea.

The demise came over House insistence that local elected officials join them in having to file personal financial disclosure statements.

Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, warned that the stance would result in no disclosure bill being passed during the 2007 Legislature.

“The question for us is whether or not we throw this particular measure away on this one particular issue or do we move forward with what we have,” said Jackson.

Opponents countered that local officials have more potential for conflicts of interest between their personal finances and their public positions than legislators.

“Local government has just as much to do with ethics and the way this state is looked at as you do,” said Rep. Charlie DeWitt, D-Lecompte. “If you don’t put locals back into this thing then you have done yourself an injustice.”

The House voted 53-47 to send the financial disclosure bill, House Bill 730, to what turned out to be its legislative grave a few hours before the session’s mandated 6 p.m. end.

The financial disclosure bill was the cornerstone of a legislative package pushed by LA Ethics 1 — a coalition of business and public interest groups.

Coalition leader Stephen Moret, president of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, blamed the House for killing the measure.

“I’m disappointed. We could have passed a bill. We should have passed a bill,” Moret said.

Problems developed as Jackson brought up for House approval a proposed compromise on SB730 hammered out by a committee of three representatives and three senators.

Differences of opinion on just how much of an individual’s finances should be made public threw the legislation into a conference committee.

But when the compromise surfaced it not only included new broader brackets of reporting of income, assets, liabilities, property ownership and other finances, but it stripped out local officials.

Local officials were included in House and Senate-passed versions of SB730. It had not been a sticking point before.

But two of the three senate conferees — Senate President Don Hines, D-Bunkie, and Sen. Robert Adley, D-Benton, refused to agree to any version of the bill that included mayors, council members, police jurors, school board members and other local elected officials.

Jackson said Hines and Adley were firm in their stand, so House conferees went along.

Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-New Orleans, accused the senators of trying to “bully” the House. “They want 105 members of the House to bow down to those two senators. I don’t like the sound of it,” he said.

Rep. Don Cazayoux, D-New Roads, said he understood the “angst” but after a couple of days of behind-the-scenes discussions there was no changing the senators’ minds.

“We need to keep our eye on the prize. That’s more important than the petty battle between the House and the Senate on this issue,” added Jackson.

Later, Adley said some House members really didn’t want the disclosure bill at all.

“This whole thing has been a sham, hiding behind local government,” said Adley.

Adley said the LA Ethics 1 coalition “worked very hard to put together a disclosure package for legislators and it’s not our job to sit here and pass it on to local government.”

Here’s how the House voted when it derailed HB730 the legislation requiring legislators and other elected officials to file personal financial disclosure reports.

FOR recommitting the bill (53) — Reps. Anders, Ansardi, Arnold, Badon, Baldone, Baudoin, Baylor, Bowler, Bruce, Burrell, Chandler, Curtis, Damico, Daniel, DeWitt, Dove, Downs, Erdey, Fannin, Farrar, Faucheux, Geymann, Greene, M. Guillory, Heaton, Hill, Hunter, Johns, Katz, Kenney, Kleckley, Lambert, Lancaster, Lorusso, Marchand, Martiny, McDonald, McVea, Morrell, Morris, Morrish, Odinet, Pinac, M. Powell, Romero, G. Smith, J.D. Smith, Townsend, Tucker, Waddell, Walker, Winston and Wooton.

AGAINST recommitting the bill (47) — Speaker Salter and Reps. Alario, Alexander, Barrow, Beard, Burns, K. Carter, R. Carter, Cazayoux, Crane, Crowe, Dartez, Doerge, Dorsey, Durand, Frith, Gray, E.J. Guillory, E.L. Guillory, Harris, Hebert, Honey, Hutter, Jackson, Jefferson, LaBruzzo, LaFleur, LaFonta, Montgomery, Pierre, Quezair, Ritchie,

Robideaux, Scalise, Schneider, Smiley, J.H. Smith, J.R. Smith, St. Germain, Strain, Thompson, Toomy, Trahan, Triche, Walsworth, White and Williams.

NOT VOTING (5) — Reps. Gallot, Kennard, Pitre, T. Powell and Richmond.

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(Marsha Shuler)