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Ethics rule tightening fails

Local officials were removed from bill

BATON ROUGE -- Refusing to impose new financial disclosure requirements on themselves in the waning hours of the legislative session, House members spiked the year's signature ethics proposal with an argument often heard in schoolhouses and sibling squabbles: If nobody else has to do it, then neither should we.

Whether that's the only reason that House Bill 730 by Reps. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, and Don Cazayoux, D-New Roads, won't become law is open to interpretation.

The House defiance, delivered in a raucous debate and a 55-45 procedural vote, came in response to Sens. Donald Hines, D-Bunkie, and Robert Adley, D-Benton, using their posts on a powerful committee to block a final vote on any disclosure bill that included local officials.

They carved out that position though both chambers had already endorsed disclosure for local officials in previous votes approving competing versions of a bill. In the Senate, Adley and Hines were part of a unanimous vote.

Rules for the six-member conference committees, charged with settling disagreements between the two houses, require that at least two of three senators agree with at least two of three House members on a compromise version to offer both chambers.

Hines and Adley refused to endorse any conference report that included local politicians, and the senators successfully forced House members on the panel to settle for a version that applied only to statewide officeholders, legislators and candidates for those posts.

The House rejection of that measure technically returned the issue to the conference committee. But with less than four hours remaining before the final adjournment, the lower chamber effectively assured that the proposal would not come up again.

Jackson told his colleagues as much, urging them to endorse a weaker bill and address local officials in another session.

Thursday's eleventh-hour wrangling marked the last steps of a session-long dance designed to put "glass pockets" on politicians and improve the state's national image, besmirched by a history of corrupt, and sometimes convicted, elected officials.

Besides bemoaning Louisiana's image, advocates for disclosure argue that the public has a right to know something about elected officials' income sources, assets and liabilities as

a way to assess potential conflicts of interests. A handful of vocal legislative opponents said the exercise would be an invasion of privacy and do nothing to prevent shenanigans.

The end result of the debate Thursday underscores two long-standing rules of the Louisiana Legislature: The nuances of legislative procedure make most anything possible near session's end, and so-called ethics reform puts lawmakers on the defensive.

The first truism is evident in rules that allowed two out of 144 legislators to overrule something for which 122 had already voted.

Reps. Charlie DeWitt, D-Lacompte, and Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers, confirmed the second precept. "Local governments have just as much to do with the way this state is looked at as you do," DeWitt told the House.

Earlier, Arnold wrote to his colleagues via e-mail: "I ask you: When was the last time a sitting member of the Legislature was indicted? Now ask yourself: When is the last time a local official in your district or parish was indicted?"

(Bill Barrow)