

June 29, 2007

The Times

House-Senate dispute kills ethics bill

BATON ROUGE — State Sens. Robert Adley of Benton and Don Hines of Bunkie being blamed for killing the biggest ethics reform legislation of this legislative session.

But a political observer says it was a planned set-up to kill the bill.

Senate President Hines and Adley, members of a conference committee on House Bill 730, refused to sign the conference report calling for local government officials, as well as those in state government, to file income reports.

When Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, brought to the House the conference committee report taking local officials out of the bill, the representatives objected and sent the bill back to conference. Neither body got a chance to vote on a final version before time ran out at 6 p.m. Thursday.

"The whole point behind this legislation is to shine a little more light on what we do as a legislature but not be so onerous as to prevent good people from seeking office," Jackson said, urging the House to approve the amended version.

"If we pass this, we will be in the top five states in income disclosure. It doesn't solve all of our problems (but it would) do a great deal in improving our public perception."

Barry Erwin, president of Council for a Better Louisiana, said that Jackson and Rep. Don Cazayous, D-New Roads, were sincere in their efforts and that even though the House and Senate overwhelmingly voted for the bill the first time, "there were a bunch of them that didn't want to vote on it again."

Jackson and Cazayous "were trying to do things to show people we are not what they think of us," Erwin said.

The bill was sent to conference committee because the Senate attached detailed reporting of income and investments and the House wanted a simpler form.

"It was a masterful stroke," Erwin said. "The conference committee was a way to kill the bill so everybody didn't have to take a vote against ethics."

The bill was supported by a statewide coalition Ethics 1, which peppered lawmakers with messages urging support.

Jackson told the House that although the Senate voted 38-0 for the bill with local officials included, "two of the three senators on the conference committee refused to sign. It's clear to me that the senators are not willing to cooperate."

House members said it would be better to leave local officials out than have no legislation but the Senate rejection of the conference committee report put it back into conference. A final version never arose.

In the Senate, Sen. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, tried to get Hines to order the conference committee to release the bill so the Senate could vote on it. Hines ruled his motion was invalid. When Fields challenged the ruling, few senators voted with him.

As time was running out in the House, Cazayous was working to find a way to adopt the conference committee report with only one senator signing it. However, without the Senate's approval, a House vote would have been meaningless.

Erwin said adoption of any kind of reporting would be better than what the state has. "Almost every other state has something more transparent. We have virtually nothing. This really would have been something to place us in the mainstream."