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'Gamesmanship' killed disclosure bill, agency says

Inclusion of local officials doomed ethics legislation

BATON ROUGE - "Gamesmanship" can be blamed for the death of a bill requiring politicians to disclose their finances, says the head of the Public Affairs Research Council.

It wasn't state Sen. Robert Adley's fault, says the heads of PAR and Ethics 1, a coalition of 50 Louisiana organizations pushing for "glass pockets," a term used for disclosure of where an elected official gets his money. Adley, a member of the conference committee, was caught in the middle of the game.

PAR director Jim Brandt and Ethics 1 leader Stephen Moret, CEO of the Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce, backed the contention by Adley, D-Benton, that "local officials were put on that bill (House Bill 730) to kill it" and it didn't matter what was done, opponents would have found a way to win.

Moret said the bill offered by his group sought legislative disclosure and was never intended to apply to local officials. The House adding them and then fighting to keep them "was an effort to kill the bill.

"If we had an up-and-down vote (on just legislators), it would have passed," Moret said. "It was very hard to read the will of the body from the very beginning."

He said he met several times with Adley and found him "candid and very direct" about favoring disclosure but not wanting local government in the bill.

"He never changed his stance. That's not something I can say for many legislators," Moret said.

In an interview Friday, Adley said he never asked to be on the conference committee on state Rep. Michael Jackson's legislation but Senate President Don Hines, who also named himself to the committee, knew of his opposition to imposing the restriction on local government officials, so he appointed him.

Adley argued on the Senate floor that a House amendment inserting local officials into Jackson's bill was improper, especially since it didn't impose the same requirement on candidates for the positions, like the bill would have required for candidates for state office.

"I knew it was going to conference when it came to the Senate," he said, and that the bill would have trouble passing because candidates for local office were excluded. Also, the bill had problems because the Senate exempted villages and towns with populations less than 5,000, but some "cities" that had shrunk to below 5,000 would have to comply.

"This bill was about the Legislature, and the public wants to know about the Legislature," he said.

His arguments for the Senate to take local officials out of the bill failed. It went back to the House, which rejected the Senate's detailed reporting brackets and sent the bill to a conference committee.

"Conference committee" is a relative misnomer in the Legislature. Committees almost never meet and, instead, a draft settlement is assembled by the proponents and submitted for signature of all six members - three Senate and three House members.

In the first draft, Adley said, Jackson, co-sponsor state Rep. Don Cazayoux, Rep. Charles Lancaster and state Sen. Ann Duplessis had signed a report that included locals when he received it. He said he would not sign it, and Hines later refused.

House rules require that at least two members from each body agree, so a second report was drafted excluding local governments. All six conferees signed it but the House rejected it, saying it wanted local governments included.

When it appeared the House would agree on a third try, Speaker Joe Salter called on state Rep. Charlie DeWitt, D-LeCompte, to address the House. DeWitt for years has been able to stir emotion among his fellow House members to kill legislation he doesn't like or pass bills he does.

"If you don't put locals in this, you have done yourselves an injustice," he said. "It's time for the chambers to grow up and admit that politics are politics."

DeWitt's country humor, saying local officials "need to go to that lick log" and report like everyone else, stirred enough support (55-45) to recommit the bill to conference with less than an hour left.

The bill died without another conference committee report being assembled.

Adley said the way it ended showed "they were going to do anything they could to kill this bill, as has been done year in and year out when you deal with glass pockets."

Brandt said the strategies used to kill the bill were disheartening because "they have the best of both worlds. They can say 'I voted for disclosure,' never intending to pass it. They're on the record voting for it."

"Glass pockets made it farther this year than it ever has," Brandt said. "It was the bottom of the ninth but no one scored."

"In the end," he said, "neither chamber had to cast a final vote on the bill, so everyone gets to claim that they voted for stronger ethics laws but the shenanigans of the other chamber prevented the bill from passing."

(Mike Hasten)