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Put ethics atop campaign issues

The handiwork of the state Legislature has ended with spent cash and a lot of questions.

Lawmakers buzzed through some \$30 billion in the recently completed session, more money than ever due to a one-time influx of funds related to the 2005 storms. What they gained is difficult to discern, especially because of the madcap activity exercised by lawmakers in the Legislature's last days.

Small wonder, then, that government reform groups expressed grave misgivings about what occurred at the Capitol in this, the last year of the Blanco administration. Money flowed — more than ever — but lawmakers resisted to the end honest efforts to police themselves or to provide taxpayers new insights into how and why they spent what they did of the taxpayer's coin.

Efforts were initiated this session by Baton Rouge area business leaders and by statewide reform groups to make more plain how lawmakers and state officials earn or otherwise acquire their own money. That "glass pockets" legislation would have made conflicts of interest among state leaders in Baton Rouge more transparent to the voting and tax-paying public.

But early on, the House of Representatives tried to undermine those efforts, adding amendments that were intended to kill, not strengthen, the ethics reform bill. In the end, little was done to strengthen either Louisiana's ethics laws or the state's tawdry image for soiled political action. Nor did the blame fall on the House alone. The Senate, too, failed to enthusiastically embrace ethics reform.

That's why the 2007 political season will become so important for the state's well-being. We need more ethical leaders. State leaders made some apparent advances in strengthening roads, in bolstering site-ready industrial parks and in funding research parks. They deserve credit for that.

But absent an elevation in state ethics laws and practices, potential out-of-state investors for our state's economy may remain wary about investing money here. Too little is known about how lawmakers are spending our money, and this session did not improve that situation. We expect the days and weeks to come to unveil some unholy spending and ill-advised allocations by the Legislature. The wake of every session seems to unveil examples of that.

The state needs a flood of high-minded individuals who are ready to do the state's business in ethical, above-board fashion. Voters need to become familiar with statewide ethics reform. Candidates need to answer hard questions about what they will do to lift

Louisiana into the leadership of states that practice clean government. Voters need to know if lawmakers will continue to spend taxpayer funds without public scrutiny. They need to know if some pet "non-profits" will continue to operate without public scrutiny. They need to know if public records laws will be strengthened or slowly eroded.

There's simply too much public cash bouncing around Baton Rouge to allow the old-time pols to stay in charge, free to abuse the public's trust. It's time to look ahead toward better days and better ways.