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Jindal Vows to Push Ethics Reform

BATON ROUGE -- Brushing aside questions about U.S. Sen. David Vitter's alleged adultery, Rep. Bobby Jindal said Monday that his first major action as governor would be a special legislative session devoted to passing stronger ethics laws.

Surrounded by more than 100 cheering supporters at the first leg of a seven-city publicity tour, Jindal criticized the Legislature for failing to pass several ethics-related bills during its recently concluded two-month session.

"The Legislature had time to spend our money. They didn't have time to do serious ethics reform," said Jindal, R-Kenner.

Although lawmakers approved a handful of minor tweaks to the ethics code, including a bill requiring ethics training for lawmakers and statewide elected officials, they could not agree on a bill that would have required legislators to disclose all their income sources and real estate holdings.

The bill died on the last day of the session when the House and Senate could not agree on whether local officials also should be required to reveal the information.

Current law requires legislators and their spouses to disclose only income they receive through contracts with the state or from gambling interests.

Linking ethics, economics

Jindal said ethics reform is key to the state's ability to attract economic development projects. "Until we have public leaders who understand they serve us, not themselves, we won't be able to attract those investments," he said.

But the second-term congressman did not say how he would seek to change the ethics laws, adding that he plans to unveil a series of policy proposals in the weeks ahead.

"The first chapter will deal with ethics. We in Louisiana need to set the gold standard for the country when it comes to ethics," Jindal said. As a member of Congress, Jindal is required to make an annual disclosure of his family's income, real estate and investment holdings. He will be required to make a similar declaration when he files to run for governor.

With barely three months left before the Oct. 20 primary, Jindal has yet to provide any details about what he wants to do if elected. Although the former state health secretary and Bush administration assistant secretary has a reputation for being a policy wonk, he

spoke Monday in broad-brush strokes about ethics reform and combating what he views as government incompetence and "out of control" spending.

Jindal's speech drew immediate fire from one of his Democratic opponents, state Sen. Walter Boasso of Arabi, who has sought in recent weeks to tie Jindal to President Bush and the Iraq war.

"Bobby Jindal says he want to lead the state into war on corruption," Boasso said. "Considering that when it comes to war Mr. Jindal's record consists of blindly supporting the president's failed policy in Iraq, I think Louisiana voters are right to be hesitant to follow him."

Vitter scandal downplayed

Jindal rebuffed several questions about the potential impact on his campaign of the allegations that Vitter patronized prostitution services in Washington, D.C., and New Orleans.

"We addressed that on Friday," Jindal said, referring to a two-sentence statement his office released late Friday in which Jindal expressed "disappointment" in Vitter's actions and said he was praying for the senator and his family.

"Today is about where we go for Louisiana," Jindal said.

Vitter has been a Jindal supporter and had been expected to play a prominent role in his campaign. But Jindal was the last high-ranking Louisiana Republican to release a statement of support for the senator after his phone number turned up among those associated with the Washington escort service.

Although Jindal announced his candidacy in January and has been traveling the state for months giving speeches and raising money, Monday's publicity tour was billed as the "official" kickoff to the campaign. Starting with a 10-minute speech to supporters at a Baton Rouge airplane hangar, Jindal stopped in Alexandria, Monroe, Shreveport, Lake Charles and Lafayette before finishing with a late-afternoon rally in New Orleans.

Jindal is making his second bid for the state's highest office, having lost by four points to Gov. Kathleen Blanco in the 2003 runoff.

Besides Jindal and Boasso, the major announced candidates are Public Service Commissioner Foster Campbell, a Democrat, and Metairie businessman John Georges, a Republican.