

Times-Picayune
June 10, 2008
by Robert Travis Scott

Lawmakers to reconsider board member disclosure

Volunteers may resign rather than tell income

BATON ROUGE -- With appointed members of a number of state boards and commissions threatening to resign en masse, lawmakers are taking another look at a new ethics law that requires panel volunteers and their spouses to disclose specific personal financial information.

The commission that runs New Orleans City Park is in danger of losing at least 22 of its 33 sitting members because of the new law, according to the group's president. A recent appointee to a museum board has already resigned to avoid financial disclosure. And members of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System board say they are troubled by it, while carefully monitoring current legislation.

"There is widespread concern about the impact of the current law," said Sen. Danny Martiny, R-Kenner.

Martiny wants to revise the law to ease the reporting requirements for members of state boards. His Senate Bill 718 is due for a hearing this morning in the House and Governmental Affairs Committee.

Louisiana has more than 500 state boards and commissions, most comprising regular citizens serving in part-time, nonpaying positions.

During the February special session on ethics called by Gov. Bobby Jindal, lawmakers created a three-tiered reporting system for public officials. The law placed boards and commissions responsible for large budgets into the same middle reporting category as legislators, who must make annual disclosure of information about personal income and transactions. Spouses of board members were included.

Martiny wants to create four tiers and move most boards and commissions down the ladder, so that they are required to report only income from government and gambling interests and potential conflicts of interest, not all personal financial information.

One of his goals in committee today is to remove a provision added by Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth, that could include many boards

and commissions in a higher tier because they are involved in making regulations. McPherson said his provision should remain in the bill because those boards hold a major responsibility and their decisions can affect people's lives and careers.

Jindal has said he will not support legislation that would weaken the new ethics laws. But Martiny said the governor has indicated that the bill, if passed, would not be vetoed.

Martiny's initiative has won a number of supporters, including the nonprofit policy groups Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, LA Ethics 1 and the Council for a Better Louisiana.

The council's president, Barry Erwin, said Monday that the law should be revised to emphasize the disclosure of possible conflicts but not specific income, which he said would not represent a weakening of the new ethics regime.

"We hope there will be some understanding that we're not going backward here," Erwin said.

In a May 29 memo, New Orleans City Park Improvement Association President Paul Masinter said his 37-member board, which currently has 33 seats filled, should not be required to publicize "the level of intimate, personal financial information that would need to be disclosed and made available to the public on the Internet."

Some members are concerned about the cost of hiring an accountant to assist them with the reporting and with the possibility of being fined due to any errors that might occur, Masinter said in his memo to the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. Ten City Park commissioners have said they would be unwilling to continue to serve under the current law and 12 others are uncertain about what they will do, Masinter said.

Rosemary Ewing, the wife of former state Senate president and gubernatorial candidate Randy Ewing, was recently appointed by Jindal to the State Museum Board but resigned because of the new disclosure requirements.

Brett Mellington, chairman of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, said the new law is "onerous" and would affect some business people on the board who for competitive reasons would not want to disclose certain information about their income.

"It leaves a bad taste in my mouth," Mellington said.