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Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: Reform worthy of Louisiana

Sunday, February 10, 2008

Louisianians who for years have yearned for more transparent and honest government should be strongly encouraged by Gov. Bobby Jindal's aggressive agenda for a special legislative session on ethics reform that begins today.

Like the governor, most legislators campaigned last fall on a promise to fight corruption and restore trust in government. Now they have a chance to start delivering. Voters expect nothing less than substantial reform and that's what Gov. Jindal's impressive package of proposals offers.

The governor's call includes substantive improvements in financial disclosure from public officials, lobbyist disclosures, restrictions on officials profiting from state business and other conflicts of interest, enforcement of ethics laws and government transparency.

He deserves credit for including every proposal on which he campaigned but also many other items suggested by an advisory panel he appointed and by citizens, civic and business groups.

Lawmakers should quickly adopt some of the most straightforward and important aspects of the governor's package, including measures to expand financial disclosure from public officials at the state and local level. It's encouraging that some associations of local elected officials, which opposed financial disclosure last year, seem to be coming around after realizing how strongly Louisianians want reform.

The public ought to know the financial interests of officials who shape public policy and spend public resources. That includes local officials, who determine matters ranging from zoning issues to property tax rates and who spend billions of taxpayers' dollars. Judges also should be included, as the governor proposes, since the public should know if judges handle cases in which they have a financial interest.

Just as important is to prevent real or perceived conflicts of interest. Gov. Jindal is appropriately proposing that legislators, their families and businesses be banned from getting state contracts -- whether negotiated or bid -- while in office and for one year after. Not surprisingly, some legislators are grumbling, saying that would discourage some people from seeking public service.

But avoiding conflicts of interests is more important than preserving the livelihood of some current or potential public officials. After all, no one is obligated to run for office. Opponents of reform always claim change is going to scare away candidates -- and it just isn't true.

The governor also wants to do away with several exemptions to the ethics code, beginning with one that let elected officials get free tickets to "cultural and sporting events." The exception is a sorry symbol of the freeloading ways of some public officials. Some legislators are already making the ridiculous argument that removing the exception would hurt their ability to meet constituents. That's nonsense. Lawmakers can meet constituents outside of paid events or they can use their legislative salary and campaign account to pay their own way.

The governor's proposals also would improve transparency and fight corruption by preventing legislators from changing how they voted on a bill after the fact, strengthening the powers of local inspector generals and giving citizens legal standing to pursue public fraud cases when the state refuses to act, among other measures.

As much as we like the governor's proposals, however, there are a few items that may need to be revised if they are to serve the public. The governor wants an administrative process to resolve disputes over access to public records. But people seeking the records should be able to choose between the administrative appeal or going straight to court.

And we disagree with a separate proposal for advisory opinions from the Board of Ethics to be publicly released only after they are "sterilized" to mask the identity of the officials involved. Encouraging public officials to seek ethical guidance is a worthy goal, but the public should retain full access to all the case's information.

Overall, though, the governor's proposals are the most ambitious ethics reform package the Legislature has seen in decades. Approving it would not only help repair Louisiana's battered image but also would go a long way in improving our state's business and civic climate.

Legislators should remember that a 2004 survey of out-of-state businesses found that cleaning up corruption was the second-most important thing Louisiana could do to lure new companies. Gov. Jindal said a soon-to-be-published study by the Forbes Strategic Research Group reached the same conclusion.

Lawmakers shouldn't underestimate the public's demand for reform, either. From levee board restructuring to assessor consolidation, residents have shown that they are tired of the old way of doing business.

The Legislature has an opportunity to make a dramatic shift away from the so-called Louisiana Way. They should do it.

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