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Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: The House just doesn't get it

Friday, February 22, 2008

Louisianians want real ethics reform, not window dressing. But it's evident that most state House members just don't get it.

Nothing else explains their gutting Thursday of a proposal to ban public officials from accepting free tickets for cultural and sport events.

Gov. Bobby Jindal's original proposal, Senate Bill 3, was meant to prevent officials, including legislators, from getting freebies for concerts, golf outings, football games and other such events.

Senators went along with the proposal. Their colleagues in the House, however, were not in the mood to give up their freeloading ways.

Rep. Patrick Connick of Harvey, one of the leading ethics-softeners Thursday, sponsored changes to allow free tickets for college and professional sports, some concerts, golf outings and fishing and hunting trips associated "with a candidate's, elected official's, or organization's fundraising event open to the general public." Rep. Connick's amendment passed 97-3.

Then Rep. Noble Ellington of Winnsboro managed to come up with an even worse amendment, allowing everyone except registered lobbyists and their employers to give freebies to elected officials. Many a House member has publicly clamored for ethics reform, but not a single legislator objected to the change.

"I think that's what people care about," Rep. Ellington said, "the lobbyists who are doing this."

What Louisianians really care about is legislators and other public officials taking free stuff and pretending that they are not influenced by it.

The diluted ban the House produced would be meaningless. Everyone else but lobbyists could still give lawmakers free tickets and other goodies. Lobbyists would simply have to deliver tickets through third parties, much like corporations bypass campaign contribution limits by donating through executives and employees.

This is sham reform, and senators need to correct it as the bill heads back their way.

Gov. Jindal's spokeswoman, Melissa Sellers, said the governor prefers the Senate version and added, "It's not over yet." The governor needs to push to save his original proposal. But if the House changes prevail in the Senate, he should veto this flawed bill and submit the original version again in the regular session.

Meanwhile, Louisianians should contact lawmakers and insist they pass a real ban on free tickets. Representatives can be reached at (225) 342-6945 and by fax at (225) 342-8336. Senators may be reached at (225) 342-2040 and fax (225) 342-0617. Residents can go to <http://www.legis.state.la.us/> to find their legislators.

When lawmakers after Katrina dismissed calls to consolidate levee boards and New Orleans' assessors, public pressure forced them to adopt reform. Many legislators need the same treatment this time around.