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Changes to new ethics rules filed

Louisiana now has one of the best ethics programs in the nation, thanks to Gov. Bobby Jindal's leadership. As Jindal guided his reform package through the Legislature, we observed that the task of protecting the package from changes and exceptions could be as difficult, if not more so, than the battle for passage.

As we expected, changes are already being proposed. Some four dozen have been submitted for the upcoming regular session, which begins Monday.

Most of those changes are proposed by key allies of the governor, so we are hopeful they are intended only to clarify some of the issues involved.

One proposed change would postpone the filing deadline of a number of new disclosure reports from elected or appointed public officials and their relatives. Ruston Rep. Rick Gallot, chairman of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee, says the proposed change stems from talks with members of the Louisiana Board of Ethics. He says the ethics board needs more time to develop the proper forms.

Also, according to Gallot, questions exist about what contracts must be reported. He wants the deadline delayed for a year.

Rules on acceptance of free tickets were among the most needed reforms passed in the special session. The new rules are already the subject of proposed changes. One proposal would loosen the ban on free tickets to certain sporting and cultural events. That is also proposed by one of the governor's floor leaders, House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown. He has pre-filed legislation to clarify the fact that elected officials can accept free admission to educational events or fundraisers for a candidate or political party.

An effort will be made in the regular session to expand personal financial reporting. The bill submitted would add levee board members, political party executives and more of the governor's appointees and transition leaders.

Three lawmakers, including the head of Jindal's tax committee, want certain elected officials to disclose the hiring or appointment of campaign contributors.

We accept the argument that many of the proposed changes are necessary to clarify and strengthen ethics laws. Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Sen. Robert Kostelka calls Jindal's ethics reforms "a work in progress." He says the challenge is to clean it up without undoing it.

The proposed changes we have seen so far should cause no damage to the new reputation Louisiana stands to earn as a result of the ethics-reform package.

We would urge, however, that the Jindal administration keep close watch. The most common way of avoiding ethics rules is not changing or repealing them. It is creating exceptions to them.

Almost 50 bills affecting ethics rules have been filed already, and the session has not yet begun. We predict there will be many more during the session, and some of them will be at cross-purposes with Jindal's ethics reforms.

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