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## Lawmakers addressed perception and reality

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BATON ROUGE -- It's been said that in many cases, perception is reality.

State lawmakers and people who have to deal with the state's new ethics laws passed in a special session only weeks ago, say the laws address both perception and reality.

"There was the perception out there that there were all these problems with corruption," said Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, who chairs the House and Governmental Affairs Committee. "We passed legislation that had substance to address the perception.

"Are we crooks? Absolutely not. For the two terms I've been here, no member of the Legislature has been charged with corruption. There's been a DWI, a sex act and failure to file income tax but nothing directly related to this job."

Pam Mitchell-Wagner, director of the Louisiana Press Association, said the new laws were needed.

"It wasn't that they were doing anything wrong," she said. "It was the perception that they were."

The new laws will give the public a closer look into who their officials are, how they live and what business relationships they're involved in.

"Certainly, more disclosure is going to be good for the citizens of the state," Wagner said.

When new disclosure reports are filed in May 2009, people will be able to see how their legislators and other elected officials make money and in some cases, how they spend it. Expenditures of more than \$2,500 have to be reported.

The Board of Ethics is required to have the expenditure reports posted on its Web site.

Another form of expenditure reporting caught some legislators by surprise. A section in a law that bans legislators from getting state contracts requires that lawmakers and their families report any monetary transaction with the state, which includes buying tickets to sporting events or, as Gallot said, "whether my son buys an LSU championship hat at the LSU Book Store."

Gallot said he believes a few adjustments might be made in the new laws in the regular session that starts March 31.

Board of Ethics Administrator Richard Sherburne said he doesn't believe that "some things that occur every day" were intended to be reportable but that's the way the law is written and the board is charged with enforcing it.

The new laws are "substantive," Gallot said. "If people think it's just window dressing, wait until disclosure is on the Internet and they calculate the time it takes to put such a detailed report together."

Getting those reports on the Internet falls in the laps of the Board of Ethics, which is currently running on a \$1.8 million budget with a staff of 23 employees to handle reports from every elected official in the state and lobbyists. The Jindal administration's proposed budget would hike that to \$4.1 million and hire 16 new employees but some board officials wonder if that is enough.

Ethics chairman Hank Perret says he has "a real concern over having enough people to be able to enforce the new laws that have been passed." Besides elected officials and lobbyists, the board will soon receive reports from many appointed officials.

Sherburne said he thinks "the dollars in there are adequate to do what we are tasked to do next year."

Wagner said the new reports will be valuable but "I think it will be hard to read them and difficult to interpret what you read. That part concerns me."

For one thing, she said, lobbyists who do other work -- as she does as head of the LPA -- have to develop a formula to determine how much of their income comes from lobbying efforts, because that's the only portion that must be reported. But she predicts "everybody will have to learn to live with it."

"It's important that newspapers learn what the information means and how significant it is" so they can explain it to the public, Wagner said.

Sherburne says the board's staff is in the process of developing the reports and is trying to make them easy to work with and read.

"Lobbying is not a dirty word," Wagner said. "You have people presenting information on both sides of an issue. They can't possibly read 4,000 bills without some help."

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