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Blanco wants officials to report recovery contracts

By **MARSHA SHULER**

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Gov. Kathleen Blanco wants public officials -- both elected and appointed -- to report the federally funded business they get as part of the hurricane recovery effort.

Though she gave no details, Blanco said Tuesday she will push for the new law when the Legislature convenes Sunday for a special session.

Blanco said she doesn't want to ban state and local officials from profiting from the work. That would be unfair, she said.

"Some people do those kind of jobs for a living," said Blanco. And they should be allowed to compete for the work just like other businessmen in the state, she said.

But transparency in the process that awards the contracts is necessary for the state's image, she said.

"I think revealing the amount of business they are allowed to do is an important thing," Blanco said.

State Treasurer John Kennedy had proposed banning all public officials from such business dealings to demonstrate that the state will handle federal funds on the up and up.

"I am disappointed," Kennedy said. "We need accountability, not 'accountability lite.' "

"It's certainly better than nothing," said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, who pushed for an outright ban.

"It at least provides public disclosure," he said.

State Rep. Donald Cazayoux, D-New Roads, has co-sponsored a proposal that would require reporting of hurricane-related business dealings of elected officials and their spouses to cover individual deals as well as those involving any company in which they own 10 percent or more.

He said a complete ban was deemed unworkable by those crafting the reporting bill.

"We started out thinking about an outright ban all in response to the way Congress has been addressing us and calling us thieves," said Cazayoux. But the ban would come into effect after the fact and would not pertain to activities that already occurred, he said.

"A bill like this can potentially help us restore some confidence," Cazayoux said.

In addition, Cazayoux said there are many part-time mayors and councilmen whose livelihoods could be harmed with a ban.

"Why should they be precluded from selling to FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) whether it's a saw or a generator?"

Cazayoux's proposal does not include appointed officials in the reporting, which is an issue Blanco indicated she wanted.

"There are so many appointed positions across the state it would be a nightmare from a reporting standpoint," Cazayoux said.

Blanco's executive counsel, Terry Ryder, said the disclosure bill doesn't have to pass with the appointed officials included.

"There's been a public issue of improper behavior and the governor wanted to address that," Ryder said. "There's nothing wrong with doing business provided they don't get it improperly or do anything improper while they are getting it."