



More ethics funds urged

Board members tell Jindal panel staff too small

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SHREVEPORT — The Louisiana Board of Ethics has too little money to properly police the state laws the agency is mandated to enforce, a member of the board said Tuesday.

The number of staffers at the ethics agency is “woefully small for the responsibility it has,” Michael Johnson of Pineville told Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal’s ethics advisers meeting on the Centenary College campus.

A staff of 20 people must keep watch over conflict of interest, nepotism, campaign finance, lobbyist and other disclosure laws, Johnson said.

The agency also is charged with educating public officials on the laws governing their conduct.

“You guys are clearly overwhelmed. It’s clear as we wrestle through this we need to give you the appropriate resources to fulfill your mandate,” said Sean Reilly, who chairs the transition panel for Jindal, who takes office Jan. 14.

Reilly asked whether it would make sense to move oversight of campaign finance laws to the Secretary of State’s Office — the state elections’ office.

Johnson responded that that move would give the ethics agency more time to deal with conflict-of-interest laws. But campaign finance is where those conflicts come to light, he said.

Board members also are frustrated by the myriad of exceptions to state ethics laws that the Legislature continues to pass, he said.

Johnson invited transition panel members to a Dec. 12 symposium to receive testimony before recommendations are made for elimination of many of those exceptions. Included

are things such as allowing legislators to receive sporting and cultural event tickets that gift restrictions would normally ban.

“The staff does have a lot of work. We do what we can,” said ethics lawyer Michael Dupree, who quickly reviewed the agency’s responsibilities with the panel.

Dupree and Johnson led off a three-hour transition team session that included ethics commission administrators from Ohio and Georgia, Public Affairs Council president Jim Brandt, and state Rep. Michael Jackson, D-Baton Rouge, promoter of personal financial disclosure legislation in the 2007 Legislature.

The Shreveport meeting was the second for the panel.

Reilly said two other meetings will be held before the panel forwards “specific” recommendations on what should be included in ethics legislation that Jindal is preparing for an early 2008 special session.

David Freel, executive director of the Ohio Ethics Commission, said if governmental ethics is a priority, then administrations should be willing to invest resources in ethics agencies.

Louisiana’s current ethics agency budget is \$1.97 million with 20 employees. Ohio’s budget is \$2.4 million with 24 employees.

Freel said his agency and that of Louisiana oversee similar programs.

Meanwhile, Georgia has a \$1.7 million annual budget with 19 employees but its operations are more limited, said Rick A. Thompson, executive director of the Georgia State Ethics Commission.

The Georgia agency is limited to managing campaign finance, lobbyist and personal financial disclosure laws, Thompson said.

The state leaves conflict-of-interest decisions to the public, which has access to information, he said.

Thompson said he is often asked how much it would cost to enforce conflict-of-interest laws in Georgia on a state and local level.

“I don’t believe one agency regardless of the size of the state, regardless of the amount of money could achieve that jurisdiction,” he said.