

Gold standard ethics plan not reached

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We had hoped that a new governor and a large number of new legislators would bring us meaningful ethics reform. We were wrong. We are seeing reform measures watered down. Others are being rewritten to reduce their effectiveness. The popular legislative game of accepting an ethics measure then loading it with enough exceptions to make it meaningless is being played with enthusiasm.

It is obvious in moves by legislators to keep valuable tickets flowing in. A bill, prior to the legislative tinkering, would have banned free golf outings and tickets to sporting and cultural events. Legislators were quick to water it down and overload it with exceptions.

They amended it to apply only to the freebies being passed out by registered lobbyists and the organizations that employ them. Schools, universities and civic organizations can still provide the freebies.

When a major sports event is scheduled, such as bowl game, the average taxpayer scrambles to find tickets and gets scalped while legislators are given the option of buying at least six tickets at the regular price.

Then, as now, treating elected officials as a special class, with privileges denied their constituents, is indefensible. Being a legislator can be a tough job, but it is still a part-time one that, in salary and other benefits, pays an average of about \$32,000 a year. They can afford to buy tickets like the rest of us.

The reason they get a sweet deal on tickets from schools and universities is obvious: The institutions look to the Legislature for funding.

As Jim Brandt of the Public Affairs Research Council once commented, "They are the same legislators that will be voting on allocations to the same institutions that are giving them the tickets."

The special favors for legislators are a form of lobbying that stays within ethical boundaries because the lawmakers don't get the tickets free.

Nonetheless, the practice comes very close to violation of ethics restrictions that prohibit public employees from taking things of value from people who have dealings with their agencies.

Another controversial practice among legislators is allowing themselves to be wined and dined by lobbyists. That issue was tackled in the special session, but the change is not significant enough to end the practice. The new bill sets a ceiling of \$50 per occasion - which could mean \$150 a day for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

We'll give state Rep. M.J. "Mert" Smiley, R-St. Amant, the benefit of the doubt. He says he mistakenly added an amendment to the bill that would make it effective Dec. 31, instead of when the governor signs it.

The ticket issue is symbolic of the Legislature's tenacity in clinging to freebies. As the session closes and measures are reviewed, Gov. Bobby Jindal will become unhappily aware that Louisiana still is a long way from the gold standard in government ethics that he hoped to achieve.