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Louisiana's murky 'glass pockets' law draws fire

By Mike Hasten
mhasten@gannett.com BATON ROUGE — Louisiana lawmakers have reported income from state and local agencies under what a national publication and two government watchdogs label as one of the weakest financial disclosure provisions in the country.

Members of the House of Representatives and the Senate are required, by a state law they approved, to file annual reports by June 30 showing "any and all income exceeding $250" that they, their spouses or any business relationships that have received payments from any state or local government entity or from a gambling enterprise. The reports require few details other than the source and amount of payments, the type of contract, whether the payment was to the lawmaker, a spouse or a company and whether an income tax return has been filed.

"Compared to other states, we have near the least amount of information available" through financial reports, said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council. "Simply reporting income received from the state is considered the least revealing of all state laws in the country."

Gov. Kathleen Blanco's attempts to make legislators report all sources of income, as the governor does, have failed miserably in the past two years. In 2004, she could not get an author to introduce the legislation and this year, the bill died in its first committee hearing.

"'Glass pockets' is a real tough sell in this state," Brandt said. "Most legislators say it's unnecessary when they're talking about being a part-time Legislature. But when they start talking pay raise, it's a different story."

A September 2004 report by the Center for Public Integrity supports that contention. It says only seven states have worse reporting requirements and that's because three — Vermont, Michigan and Idaho — have none and Utah's is virtually nonexistent.

Louisiana's financial disclosure law received a score of 43 out of 100 — an F — by the center's assessment. Tennessee and Wyoming scored 40 and West Virginia tied Louisiana at No. 42 in the nation.

Neighboring states have stricter reporting requirements. Texas ranked third in the nation — behind Hawaii and Washington — in supplying income information that the CPI believes voters deserve to know. Texas scored 88, Arkansas 75 and Mississippi 56. Other Southern state scores were Alabama 78, Georgia 61, Florida 63, South Carolina 60 and North Carolina 70.

"Eight states define reportable employment so narrowly that lawmakers could avoid disclosing huge sources of salaries and wages," the report says. "Louisiana, for example, requires only reporting salaries earned from another government agency or from a gambling interest."

The report, which gave the state a low score for the lack of details required of filers, pointed out several flaws in Louisiana's system. Included are the lack of complete disclosure for candidates and elected officials, not stating the officials' position in a company or the type of business and not reporting investments unless the filer or spouse owns at least 10 percent of a company that does business with a public body.