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## **Louisiana trails nation in lobbyist law** **Senator says state's disclosure law is 'a work in progress'**

**By Mike Hasten**

[mhasten@gannett.com](mailto:mhasten@gannett.com) BATON ROUGE — Louisiana's lobbyist registration law doesn't measure up to other states' laws in a national survey, but the chairman of a legislative committee that handles ethics matters said that could change in the future.

The Center for Public Integrity, which examined lobbyist laws across the country, ranked Louisiana's law 33rd in the nation for disclosure required of the more than 500 lobbyists that seek to influence the Legislature.

The survey was done prior to the Legislature enacting a law requiring expenditure statements from those who lobby the executive branch, which center officials said would have resulted in a higher score. But the state would lose points under a new law increasing to \$500 the spending threshold for determining whether a person seeking to influence state action is a lobbyist.

"Our lobbyist law is actually pretty weak," said Jim Brandt, Public Affairs Research Council president. "It doesn't require that they reveal much of anything. Unless they hit the entertainment threshold, there's not much to report."

Louisiana tied with Florida and Oregon with a score of 55 on a 100-point scale based on the answers to 48 questions. The goal was full disclosure of money spent seeking to influence governmental decisions, public access to the reports and accountability to see that the rules are followed and consequences imposed on those who didn't play by the rules.

The survey found there are almost four registered lobbyists for each of Louisiana's 144 legislators — 105 in the House and 39 in the Senate.

That's far from the highest ratios — 18-to-1 in New York and 13-to-1 in Florida — and about average nationwide.

Sen. Charles Jones, D-Monroe, chairman of the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee, said Louisiana's lobbyist disclosure law is "a work in progress" and is likely to be strengthened.

"The issue is accountability and reporting so the public will know who has access to the people who make the laws," Jones said.

Each year's legislative session has thousands of proposed laws and lawmakers "can't be informed as we need to be on all issues," he said. "The lobbyists in Louisiana are good people. They provide a valuable service by providing insight on issues — often on both sides."

Jones said their service "has to be balanced with making sure their participation in the process is done in a way that the public can have confidence in the governmental process. We need to allow lobbyists to do their jobs but make sure there's sunshine on the process."

The Legislature will certainly consider more ways to tighten up the lobbyist registration and reporting laws, he said, "but not in a knee-jerk way just because some other states have done it."

Jones said legislators are willing to increase lobbyists' reporting requirements because "there's not one of the

144 members who doesn't want to do the best possible job and have Louisiana seen in the best possible light."

Earlier this year, the state got in a bad national spotlight, prominently featured in the summary of the Center for Public Integrity lobbyist disclosure report. Jones' counterpart in the House, Rep. Charles Lancaster, R-Metairie, said the limit on contributions for sporting and cultural events should be increased because lobbyists can't buy the best seats under the \$100 limit.

Legislation banning lobbyists from buying lawmakers' tickets breezed through the Senate this year but died in the House and Governmental Affairs Committee, chaired by Lancaster.

"It was the manner in which it was killed that was really disturbing," Brandt said. "It appeared that it was going to pass but then it was deferred; no record vote, no fingerprints. The manner in which it was done left a lot to be desired and showed we have a long way to go to improve our image."

The report is critical of Louisiana's reporting law on several counts: not requiring a listing of subject matter or type of lobbying to be done; not requiring a report on how much the lobbyist is paid; not requiring itemized spending; not requiring the lobbyists' employers to report; and lack of an overall amount spent on lobbying.

Most of the complaints mirror proposals offered by PAR for improving the law. PAR wanted more specific reporting that includes totals spent on particular subjects and elimination of exceptions to receiving gifts, particularly sporting and cultural event tickets.

"There's always room for improvement," said Denise Bottcher, spokeswoman for Gov. Kathleen Blanco. "There are always steps we can take to make transparency in government clearer."

One step taken by the governor this year was personally shepherding the executive branch lobbying law through the legislative process.

Randy Haynie of Lafayette, who heads one of the largest lobbying firms in the state, said he has no problem complying with any requirement imposed by the Legislature.

"I'm a firm believer in reporting," said Haynie, whose lobbyist registration number is 001 by being the first in line when the 1993 law went into effect.

The current legislative lobbying law is easy to comply with, he said, but he sometimes walks a thin line between his lobbying, public relations and corporate education

Haynie said the new executive branch reporting law is making "our jobs as registered lobbyists more complex" because he has to account for anyone in the executive branch of state government who happens to come to a function he's hosting for legislators. "It takes time and it takes more record keeping" to keep up with his 40 clients.

The state's other major lobbying firms — Adams and Reese, Jones Walker and Harris and Associates — have a similar number of accounts.

"We are, in the big picture, a small state," Haynie said, and the amount reported spent on lobbying in Louisiana supports that statement.

The Center for Public Integrity report shows Louisiana lobbyists reported spending less than \$550,000 in 2004 — about \$1,000 each. In contrast, Mississippi lobbyists spent \$13.6 million trying to influence the legislature and government agencies.

Also, Haynie said he's surprised at how few lobbyists have registered so far under Louisiana's new executive branch disclosure law. Of the 75 lobbyists on the books this week, only 5 were not already registered under

the original law.

"The whole idea was to bring in all those other people who try to influence government — everybody who walks into a state building" wanting state agencies to do something, he said. "It will take time to get it working."

Branch said the executive branch reporting is "better than nothing" but not anything to brag about.

He agrees with Haynie that many more people should have registered because "we have a huge number of state agencies. Virtually everything in state government is in the executive branch."

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