



I-Team: Governor's Office Ranks Last In Transparency

POSTED: 6:34 am CDT July 9, 2008

WDSU -- The I-Team has discovered the governor's office ranks dead last in the country when it comes to transparency. Some lawmakers say after this past legislative session they now know why.

"It's really a chaotic time for the legislature," said Rep. Walker Hines.

"The last day is pretty hectic, we're dealing with a lot of things," said Rep. Neil Abramson.

One of those bill they're dealing with include Senate Bill 363, proposed by Sen. Tom Nevers from Bogalusa. It's an education bill dealing with the Louisiana Youth Advisory Council.

"We got this the last day of the session," said Abramson.

And the Democrat from Uptown New Orleans sensed something was wrong with the bill, in particular a last-minute amendment which deals with records in the custody of the governor's office.

"This one came to us the last day, in the last few hours and it was an amendment put on that had nothing to do with the bill debated, so when you get those it raises your eyebrows and you have to say 'What's going on?'" said Abramson.

Hines agrees.

"Clearly the amendment is a very deceptive amendment, the original bill dealt with a youth advisory board."

"It did not appear to me to be related to the same subject matter as the bill which was kids issues, children matters," said Abramson.

Nonetheless - the bill and governor's amendment passed in both the House and Senate during the session's closing minutes. Governor Jindal signed it into law Tuesday night.

"The amendment takes away the governor's records, removes entire transparency, which we passed during the special session, it removes transparency for all the governor's records and that's very disappointing," said Hines.

Tulane University political analyst Dr. Brian Brox inspected the legislation for the I-Team..

"It sort of expands the veil of secrecy over certain governor's activities without a whole lot of public debate, this was not done with a full debate in the legislature," said Brox.

"Basically any document from his office is now off limits, you can't do any type of public records request ... he doesn't have to produce anything if he doesn't want to," said WDSU Political Analyst Charles Rice.

This means the governor's schedule, documents that show who influences his decisions and who he meets with now and in the future, would be shielded.

"I'm worried the governor talks transparency for everyone else but himself and that's something I fear this legislation does," said Hines.

"As far as having transparent government in the governor's office we're still not there, this governor has been very good at championing transparent government except in his own office," said Jim Brandt.

Brandt heads up the Public Affairs Research Council, or PAR. PAR is Louisiana's largest government watchdog agency.

"It's so broad, basically anything in the governor's office is out of reach of the sunshine laws and out of reach of public scrutiny," said Brandt.

"It's like the governor is taking a page from the Bush playbook and secrecy seems to be the word of the day," said Rice.

In fact, a study done by the Citizens Access Project at the University of Florida ranks Louisiana last in the country when it comes to transparency in the governor's office.

"I think we have to have more sunshine on the governor's office," said Hines.

"Had myself and other legislators known this was snuck onto another bill, hijacked if you will, I think we clearly would not have supported that bill," said Hines.

And that's why some lawmakers say the governor has to start practicing what he preaches.

"It has to be done if we intend to change the perception of corruption in the state of Louisiana," said Hines.

The governor office is responding - sending us a statement on Senate Bill 363 - "We were happy to work with the Press Association and to publicly testify with them about the importance of this legislation to expand public records access. This legislation was publicly debated in conference committee and has been publicly touted for being a true step forward in increasing transparency into the executive branch," writes Press Secretary Melissa Sellers.

We should mention, when we contacted the press association - we were told they do not think this legislation goes far enough. While it does make public certain documents held by about 60 agency's under the control of the governor, the governor's office itself, as you heard in the story - is off limits.

Carl Redman with the Press Association told the I-Team, "It's a public policy issue. If you want to see Bobby Jindal's schedule, you can sue and he doesn't have to give it to you."

The Press Association hopes to address this matter during next year's legislative session. We should point out that Louisiana has consistently ranked at the bottom of the list when it comes to transparency in the governor's office before Bobby Jindal was elected last fall.