

Jindal not identifying suite guests for Saints game

By MARSHA SHULER

Advocate Capitol News Bureau

Published: Jan 23, 2010 - Page: 1A

Gov. Bobby Jindal, who touts the transparency of his administration, refused Friday to release the names of his guests to watch the postseason contests of the New Orleans Saints.

The Advocate filed a public records request Tuesday asking the governor to identify the guests who used his suite in the Louisiana Superdome to watch the Jan. 16 playoff game and who would join him Sunday for the National Football Conference Championship Game.

The winner of the game between the Saints and the Minnesota Vikings goes to the Super Bowl.

Critics say the public has a right to know who has access to the governor and who benefits from receiving a premium seat at a sold-out game.

Jindal's executive counsel's office late Friday afternoon provided copies of five e-mails from people seeking entry to the suite for themselves and others. The suite handles more than 30 spectators.

In only one instance do the e-mails indicate that entry was gained. "Thank (sic) for the hospitality and allowing me to be 'in that number' last night," state Rep. Gordon Dove, R-Houma, wrote Jindal's chief of staff Timmy Teepell on Jan. 17. "I would like to again request tickets" for Sunday's game.

Public Affairs Research Council President Jim Brandt said Friday he was disappointed the public records request had not been fulfilled.

"I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be released. It's a legitimate request for information," said Brandt, who heads the governmental research group.

Jindal's big initiative as a new governor in 2008 was to improve the state's image by changing ethics laws that promoted transparency in government.

Earlier Friday, state Democratic Party chairman Michael McHale, of Lake Charles, said Jindal should reveal who is using his spacious suite in the state-owned Superdome. The governor's suite is next door to that of Saints owner Tom Benson.

“He (Jindal) is always talking about openness and transparency and all the ethics laws he’s passed,” McHale said. “We ought to know who he’s entertaining. What lobbyists, campaign contributors are getting his ear. What he’s doing with the taxpayer funded suite?”

“If everything is above-board, what’s the big deal?” McHale said.

Louisiana Republican Party chairman Roger Villere said Friday night, “I don’t think that’s been an issue ever, who the governor has had in. ... They (Democrats) should be positive with everything going on with the Saints instead of going negative about who’s sitting in the governor’s suite.”

Jindal said earlier this week that he would attend Sunday’s game against the Vikings. He did not go to the Jan. 16 game against the Arizona Cardinals game. He said then that he prefers to watch games on television.

According to published reports, Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty declined Jindal’s offer to join him in the Superdome suite. The two governors have been frequently mentioned as potential presidential candidates come 2012.

Jindal’s press secretary Kyle Plotkin said the e-mails released Friday at 4 p.m. responded to The Advocate’s request made Tuesday. He said Jindal’s office does not maintain a list of who got cleared to enter the governor’s suite.

In 2008, Jindal’s office released information about lawmakers and others who received free tickets in the governor’s suite for a Hannah Montana concert at the New Orleans Arena.

Jindal’s predecessor, Kathleen Blanco, refused in January 2008 to identify who watched the LSU national championship game from the governor’s suite.

None of the five e-mails released by Jindal included any response to the requests.

In one e-mail, state Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, wrote that “Ginger Adam and I would love to come to the Saints game (Jan. 16) and sit in the Gov.’s suite. Let me know ...”

An aide to state Rep. Henry Burns, R-Haughton, sought help in how to go about getting Saints tickets; and Henry Shane asked the governor’s office to help artist George Rodrigue get into the Superdome suite.

Jindal said last week that the first in line to see the Saints games from the governor’s box are economic development prospects. After that, Jindal said, he makes seats available to elected officials, staffers and members of the National Guard.