

Our Views: Open more state records

Advocate Opinion page staff

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The League of Women Voters of Louisiana has long been a vital voice for transparency and accountability in Louisiana's state government.

The League recently did an important public service in pressing for more public access to the records of the Governor's Office. Specifically, the League commended state Sen. Robert Adley, R-Benton, for sponsoring Senate Bill 593, which is aimed at bringing greater transparency to the Governor's Office.

Recently, the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, a nonprofit, nonpartisan state government watchdog group, came out in favor of greater transparency in the Governor's Office, too. We have long argued that such transparency is essential in advancing accountability at the highest levels of state government. We are heartened by the involvement of the League of Women Voters of Louisiana and the Public Affairs Research Council in promoting that goal.

SB593 is scheduled to be discussed today by the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee. Too often in the recent past, such bills have had a way of getting deferred or quickly rejected. Gov. Bobby Jindal is not supporting Adley's efforts.

We hope that SB593 is the basis for a serious and careful discussion today by the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee, and we hope the committee approves a bill that embraces the basic objectives of SB593.

As part of existing law, records created as part of budget deliberations for many powerful and important state agencies can be shielded from public view for six months. SB593 would allow public access to these important budget documents.

Present law also allows governors to shield a wide range of documents involved in the so-called "deliberative process," the means through which governors make decisions. As we have said before, this is a very fuzzy concept that gives the governor and his advisers too much power to hide their activities from the public. The language in SB593 regarding the deliberative process is still vague at times, much to our dismay. But Adley's bill does more narrowly define the circle of governor's advisers who would be covered under the deliberative process to the governor, his chief of staff and his executive counsel. That's a very good step in the right direction.

We encourage members of the public to contact members of the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee today and urge them to support Adley's objectives.

Voting members of the committee are state Sens. Jody Amedee, D-Gonzales; Robert Kostelka, R-Monroe; John R. Smith, D-Leesville; Dan Claitor, R-Baton Rouge; Jack Donahue, R-Mandeville; Lydia P. Jackson, D-Shreveport; Robert Marionneaux, D-Livonia; Edwin Murray, D-New Orleans; and Mike Walsworth, R-West Monroe. Voters can reach the senators through the state Senate switchboard, (225) 342-2040.

The cause of bringing greater government transparency to the Governor's Office and the rest of state government should not be seen as a referendum on Jindal. We have supported similar bills when Jindal's predecessor, Gov. Kathleen Blanco, a Democrat, was in office. State Rep. Wayne Waddell, a Shreveport Republican, co-sponsored such legislation during Blanco's term.

The basic issue is guaranteeing public access to the documents of government, regardless of who is in office.

The members of the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee have an opportunity to advance that goal today, and we hope they do their duty.