



Give public records measure fair hearing

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Editorial

Sen. Robert Adley continues his quest to buck the secrecy trend here this week when a committee hears his legislation designed to open up more records in the Louisiana governor's office. The Benton Republican insists ethics reforms of 2008 and 2009 resulted in more gubernatorial papers being excluded from the state's excellent public records laws.

Gov. Bobby Jindal and members of his administration refuse to concede that is the case and they are fighting any and all efforts to change anything.

Senate Bill 593 by Adley attacks that provision in current law that shields budget deliberations from public view. Ethics reform legislation put those records that document advice given the governor by his staff off limits.

"This language means that anyone who does any work whatsoever for the governor is now private," Adley said. In addition, any advice given the governor dealing with the state budget can be kept private for six months.

"And why should anything dealing with the budget of the state of Louisiana be private?" Adley asked. "Never. That is the taxpayers' money. That should never be private."

Steven Waguespack, Jindal's executive counsel, said "deliberative process" is a concept that has existed in Louisiana law for a long time. He said an executive needs advisers willing to offer unfettered advice and a wide array of opinions.

The Louisiana Press Association, a trade group representing state newspapers, endorsed the reforms of 2008 and 2009, and that was probably a decision made too hastily. Spokesmen for the LPA may have been like Adley who was asked why he voted for those reforms.

Adley conceded he read the legislation but didn't fully understand it at the time. And he now admits he made a mistake.

Whenever the governor's records are discussed, Jindal's advisers are always quick to note that the LPA endorsed those changes. Even the governor uses that argument in his own defense.

"For two years in a row we have passed bills, endorsed by the Louisiana Press Association, that have opened up more records in the governor's office than have ever been opened up before,"

the governor said

What isn't said by supporters of the status quo is the fact that two of the state's largest newspapers — the New Orleans Times-Picayune and The Advocate of Baton Rouge — have opposed the ethics changes from the beginning.

No newspapers have ever done more for the cause of openness in state government than those two publications, and they are supported by good government groups in the state.

The Public Affairs Research Council said Adley's bill and one by Rep. Wayne Waddell, R-Shreveport, are the only bright spots on the public records front at the current session.

"Most of the other bills so far are moving in the wrong direction," a PAR analyst said.

Both of the current bills still respect the privacy of sensitive records relating to the governor's office, as well as his intraoffice communications.

A writer for The Advocate put the current situation in proper perspective when she said, "Gov. Bobby Jindal pushes transparency and openness in every area of government from the bottom up, but the openness stops at his office door."

Members of the Committee on Senate and Governmental Affairs should approach Adley's bill this week with an open mind and give adequate consideration to both sides of this issue.

The public's right to know should still be the guiding principle whenever legislation of this nature is being heard.