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Ethics reform: How will it be funded?

The Legislature has approved long-needed ethics reforms that, when implemented, will make Louisiana a national leader in governmental ethics. There are questions being raised, however, about the implementation. The most frequently raised? Where will the funding come from for new responsibilities given to the state Board of Ethics?

How will the enforcement of new mandates approved in the special session be funded?

The Council for a Better Louisiana and the Public Affairs Research Council, the leading governmental watchdog organizations, have both raised questions about the cost and how it will be met.

Barry Erwin, president of CABL, says a new level of staffing will be required, but that has not been part of past discussions.

PAR President Jim Brandt says, without enforcement, "We will have done a lot for nothing."

Their comments are on target.

The Jindal reform package was approved with laws requiring financial-disclosure reports from thousands of elected and appointed officials in state and local government, reports on lobbyist activity that will be more frequent and more detailed and increased ethics training for public servants.

That's a heavy - and costly - burden for the Louisiana Board of Ethics, yet the Legislature did not provide any additional funding.

Those who will carry the heavier burden are concerned about the money that will be needed. Richard Sherburne, state ethics administrator, says he and others on the ethics-board staff are trying to calculate the need in terms of people and space for those people. The computer system needed to handle the heavier load must also be determined, Sherburne says.

The ethics board's lease will be up at the end of April, but there is no plan at this point for relocation. Sherburne says he can't even start looking for new quarters until he determines the size of the staff.

There is some new funding for the agency in the governor's executive budget. Commissioner of Administration Angèle Davis said the budget for the upcoming year includes about \$1.9 million in new money to implement the new ethics laws. The current budget is \$1.9 million, which covers 20 staff members.

Gray Sexton, who was administrator for the ethics board for several years, says the responsibilities given the board now exceed those of similar agencies in other states, but the board is funded at a fraction of those agencies. Sexton says he always has contended that the ethics board has been significantly under-funded and its enforcement capability compromised.

Jindal has given Louisiana a reform package that ranks the state extremely high in comparison to other states. We have moved in the right direction. Now, personnel and other needs resulting from the new programs must be identified and necessary funding must be allotted.
