

# Watchdogs praise most ethics work

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Officials with watchdog groups that have pressed state government for years to update its ethics laws, generally praised the Legislature's recent efforts to do so.

But one measure passed in the two-week special session that ended Tuesday disappointed them. House Bill 41 would strip the Louisiana Board of Ethics of its authority to rule on whether public officials violated state ethics laws.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, known as PAR, said in a news release Wednesday that the administration-sponsored HB41 "may undermine many of the gains made this session."

HB41 allows the Ethics Board to continue its current job of investigating and prosecuting ethics complaints. But the bill shifts the board's authority to determine the guilt or innocence of the ethics charges to administrative law judges.

"This is widely seen as a compromise to satisfy legislators who fear having unfair rulings made against them by the board," Brandt stated.

The Legislature sent to Jin-

dal's desk bills that would require most elected and many appointed officials to publicly disclose their personal finances; would ban legislators and some governor's appointees from having state contracts; would expose lobbyist dealings to more public scrutiny; and would limit the wining and dining of public officials by those seeking to influence them as well as would restrict free tickets to many sporting and cultural events.

Wendell Lindsay Jr., president of the state branch of the self-styled citizens' lobby, Common Cause, said: "Our overall view is that we are happy to see the changes that were made by and large. We think that is a positive step. ... We do feel, however, that the changes to the ethics code and disclosure are only part of the problem."

"It's a far cry from where we have been in the past," said Council for a Better Louisiana president Barry Erwin of the session.

"The core part of the package passed in what I consider pretty good shape."

Erwin said some future changes will necessary. For instance, the first disclosure

statements are not required until May 15, 2009, reflecting 2008 financial activity. Those covered can also ask for an extension if they have filed for an extension on filing of their tax returns.

"The guts and meat of the package passed," said Sean Reilly, a leader in Blueprint Louisiana and chairman of Jindal's ethics advisory panel.

What the Legislature passed in key areas went beyond what the business groups of La Ethics 1 and Blueprint Louisiana recommended, Reilly said.

"If you look at the breadth and the scope of the disclosure bills, it's tight. It's going to create transparency," Reilly said.

Maybe even too broad, he said, for some volunteer boards.

Under the disclosure bill, those who serve on state boards and commissions that handle more than \$1 million in state funds or make more than \$16,800 a year in salary from board jobs must annually file reports detailing their personal financial dealings. "The threshold may need to be raised," Reilly said.

*Marsha Shuler and Will Sentell contributed to this report.*