

Special session aims to can corruption

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Local legislators have new vision for Louisiana government

Louisiana legislators today begin a three-week special session on ethics reform to stomp out public corruption and beef up enforcement in a state mired in scandals.

Following through on the backbone of his campaign, Gov. Bobby Jindal called the special session less than a month after taking office Jan. 14 in an attempt to bring trust back to government.

"Right now, there is a general distrust of government," said newly elected District 90 state Rep. Greg Cromer of Slidell. "But now there is a sense of hope with the new Legislature. This is a big opportunity for us to get people to trust the state government."

After hearing recommendations from a 50-person ethics advisory council handpicked by Jindal, both the House and Senate will debate separate laws, likely 40 to 50, and may "have something on the floor for a vote by Wednesday or Thursday," state Rep. Tim Burns, R-Mandeville, said.

Once finished in March or later, "We will have one of the strongest ethics reform packages in the country," Burns said.

It will be a first.

In 2004, editors of the Corporate Crime Reporter ranked Louisiana as one of the top three corrupt states in the nation based on corruption convictions in each state over a 10-year period.

"Anything we do on this issue will boost our image in the country," Cromer said.

This year, Louisiana's corruption seemed to reach an all time high. U.S. Rep. William Jefferson was indicted on 16 counts of bribery and former New Orleans City Councilman Oliver Thomas resigned after admitting to taking bribes, just a few of the more than dozen or so public corruption cases investigated this year.

And in 2005, former St. Tammany Parish Councilman Joe Impastato was federally indicted on extortion charges for an alleged hurricane debris removal kickback scam. His trial is set for later this year.

Corruption "is the baseline. It's the fundamental line," said Mandeville's **Martin "Marty" Mayer**, who was tapped as one of Jindal's ethics advisory council members. "If we can't solve that problem, other types of reform won't matter."

During the past year, those and other cases splashed national headlines, causing naysayers to question Louisiana's fiscal responsibility when asking for billions in hurricane recovery funds. Its implications are far reaching.

Mayer, who has lobbied Congress on a variety of real estate issues, said he's often looked down upon and even sneered at when lobbying in Washington D.C.

"You get tired of going to these things, and everybody is looking at you like you are corrupt," Mayer said. "Taking a bold step is really critical at his juncture."

Most local legislators believe the 31-point reform recommendation is well designed, Cromer said.

It could add more ethics board employees to the 21-person team now in charge of policing roughly 3,000 elected officials and another 200,000 public employees.

Another judge to review a backlog of cases may also be hired, Burns said. Already, the ethics board

has two auditors in charge of 14,000 yearly campaign finance reports. Another is currently being hired.

Currently, the campaign finance monitoring is "under enforced," Burns said. "You really don't have an real enforcement now."

He confirmed a backlog of nearly \$800,000 in ethics violations fines, many by former candidates who lost campaigns, that state government has still not collected.

"There's nobody to collect the money ... which is awful," Burns said.

Cromer said 85 to 90 percent of state legislators support the reform, but one section may draw some heat - the mandate that all legislators must report all their income.

Cromer, who works at NASA's Michoud Assembly Facility in Mississippi, doesn't personally have a problem with reporting his income, but he said some other legislators who own businesses might object to the bill.

"Business owners will be affected, and that could cause a problem," Cromer said.

He also has no problem with having lobbyists make monthly reports on their activities and finances to the Louisiana Board of Ethics.

"The majority of lobbyists are good people and provide a needed service, but there are some that do need the regulation," Cromer said.

As for not accepting meals, Cromer said the bill doesn't eliminate free meals entirely, but the rules governing them might have to be tweaked. He said he was more concerned with other free perks for legislators like free tickets to sporting events. He said that should be looked at with a bit more scrutiny.

Whatever the case "we have to do whatever we need to do to reposition the state in the country," District 1 Sen. A.G. Crowe said.