

top of the news

No veiled references to transparency in Senate debate

House speaker shifts gears on speeding through budget changes

Committee would make it harder to waive right to jury trial

AROUND THE CAPITOL

A clear difference of opinion on transparency

The ongoing effort by some legislators to make the governor's office more transparent may have received a public-relations boost last week from a pair of reports that take issue with Gov. Bobby Jindal's record on the topic. The first came from the left-leaning Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, which included Jindal on a list of America's worst governors and cited Jindal's opposition to several transparency bills as one of the reasons. Later in the week, Sen. Robert Adley, R-Benton, dug up a January report from another Washington, D.C., watchdog group, Good Jobs First, which ranked Louisiana 46th among the 50 states and District of Columbia for the amount of information it provides about the distribution of federal economic stimulus dollars. "I want to get up and read some reports where we rank No. 1 in America in transparency, not last," Adley told his colleagues from the Senate floor. The senator, who has become a vocal critic of the governor, is sponsoring Senate Bill 159, which would open more records of the governor's office to public inspection. Adley's remarks brought a quick response from Stephen Waguespack, Jindal's executive counsel, who cited a new law, approved last year with backing from the Louisiana Press Association, that opens the reporting and tracking of how stimulus money is used. "It needs time to work," Waguespack said. "Any accusation that this state is not tremendously more transparent than before is wrong."

Budget balancing act will be delayed

Reversing course from his earlier statements, House Speaker Jim Tucker said last week that lawmakers likely will wait until mid- to late May before taking up Gov. Bobby Jindal's plan for shoring up a \$319 million mid-year budget deficit. Tucker, R-Algiers, had said earlier that the budget-balancing bill would be put on a fast track through the Legislature, to give agencies as much time as possible to implement any budget cuts. But the speaker said Thursday that the deficit-reduction bill likely would be considered around the same time that the House takes up the 2010-11 budget bill. By electing to wait, Tucker indicated that the lower chamber is unlikely to push for any additional budget cuts beyond the \$65 million that Jindal proposes to save through a freeze on nonessential spending. The extra time will also give legislators a clearer picture of what kind of help is coming from Washington, where Congress is considering extending parts of the economic

stimulus law for six months. The \$427 million that Louisiana would gain from that is a key part of Jindal's plan.

Bill aims to give crime victims more power

A House committee took the first steps last week toward making Louisiana the 31st state to give crime victims the right to determine if defendants can waive their right to a jury trial. House Bill 940 by Rep. Jack Montucet, D-Scott, is a constitutional amendment backed by Attorney General Buddy Caldwell that would require prosecutors to sign off before criminal defendants can waive their right to a jury trial. Under current law, prosecutors have no recourse if defendants elect to take their chances with a judge instead of a jury. Assistant Attorney General David Caldwell said that can sometimes create the impression "that there's some backroom deal going on." But opponents, led by the Louisiana Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, said the right to waive a jury trial is important to ensure fairness. The House Committee on Administration of Criminal Justice voted 10-3 to move the bill, which now heads to the Civil Law & Procedures Committee.

Lawmakers demand

report on CCC

Two West Bank lawmakers have filed separate resolutions demanding that the Department of Transportation and Development present plans for the future operations of the **Crescent City Connection** to the Legislature this week. Sen. David Heitmeier, D-Algiers, struck the first blow by getting Senate approval for his Senate Resolution 13 on April 6. The resolution calls on the agency to present its plans for the bridge operations to the Senate Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works by April 30. Heitmeier's resolution said that the agency was directed during a committee meeting in 2009 to do the assessment of the span and make the report. Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, who has been one of the most vocal critics of the department's operation of the bridge, wants the report done earlier. He got the House on April 14 to approve his House Resolution 27 calling on the department to present its plan for the continuation or end of its **Crescent City Connection** Division for Monday's meeting of the House Appropriations Committee. His resolution also calls on the department to make its report Tuesday to the House Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works. Connick said he filed the resolution because the transportation agency has not presented "any plan regarding the cessation or the continuation of the **Crescent City Connection** Division," despite repeated requests. Unless extended by the Legislature, the bridge tolls must end Dec. 31, 2012. Transportation department spokeswoman Jodi Conachen said the agency will be ready with its report on the dates specified.

Panel kills plan for secret votes in House, Senate

A Senate committee voted 3-2 against a proposal to allow the House and Senate to hold secret elections for the chambers' top officers. The Committee on Senate and Governmental Affairs last week rejected Senate Concurrent Resolution 7 by Sen. Butch Gautreaux, D-Morgan City, to require the House to elect its speaker and speaker pro tem by secret ballot and the Senate to pick its president and president pro tem the same way. The elections are now conducted in public by a roll-call vote. Gautreaux said the secret-ballot election would make the Legislature more independent of the governor's office, which has historically backed or opposed candidates. Sen. Bob Kostelka,

R-Monroe, chairman of the panel, pointed out that Gautreaux's measure was filed before the election of a new speaker pro tem in the House caused some bruised feelings and resulted in some House members, who did not go along with the candidate backed by Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, getting reassigned to less favorable committees. Gautreaux's measure not only called for the secret-ballot elections but the destruction of the votes and any record of how lawmakers voted.

staying in touch

To contact lawmakers:

Senate: 225.342.2040;

225.342.0617 fax

House: 225.342.6945;

225.342.8336 fax

TRACKING BILLS

Citizens can find the Louisiana legislative home page on the Internet at www.legis.state.la.us. Information on legislators, committee assignments, schedules and bills is available, as well as information on services for people with disabilities. The Public Update Legislative Services Line or PULS Line, is available toll free (Louisiana only) 800.256.3793 outside Baton Rouge. Legislative staff will answer questions about bills, direct callers to committee information and explain aspects of the legislative process.

quotable

"We have a Legislature that almost looks like an arm of the governor's office. We are bright people and can make the right decisions if allowed to do so."

Sen. BUTCH GAUTREAU, D-Morgan City, on his unsuccessful resolution to allow the election of legislative leaders by secret ballot, relying less on gubernatorial backing or opposition.

Copyright, 2010, The Times-Picayune Publishing Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Used by NewsBank with Permission.