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Political Horizons for Aug. 10, 2008

‘Gold standard’ not so shiny now

- By [MARSHA SHULER](#)
- Advocate’s Capitol news bureau
- Published: Aug 11, 2008 - UPDATED: 12:45 p.m.

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Gov. Bobby Jindal started his administration with a to-do list.

First up, achieving the “gold standard” of ethics — the touted goal of a February special legislative session.

New laws require personal financial disclosure by a wide array of elected and appointed officials and ban legislators, statewide elected officials and top agency appointees from doing business with the state.

Jindal proclaimed “job done.” He touted how the state had improved its national ranking when it comes to openness and transparency in government.

Six months and a regular legislative session later, it’s time to review what’s happened.

“As far as transparency and income disclosure, the Legislature is definitely the gold standard, definitely No. 1 in the country. Beyond that . . . ,” said Rep. Hunter Greene, his voice trailing off in thought.

The Baton Rouge Republican tried to get laws changed to provide more information about Jindal and future governors’ transition teams. The groups raise and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars. Greene ran into opposition from Jindal’s office.

Rep. Neil Abramson, a New Orleans Democrat, wanted elected officials to disclose political appointments and jobs provided individuals who contributed to their campaigns.

Jindal opposed the legislation when it was considered in the February ethics session. It died. Abramson got input from Jindal’s office and won passage of it in the regular session only to have Jindal veto it.

Abramson said the veto “tells the people that this bill is too much sunshine; that there is something to hide.”

Meanwhile, there’s a new law emanating from the 2008 Legislature — endorsed by the Jindal administration — that ostensibly would open more governor’s office records to the public. But the law only clears up what

some think is an ambiguity involving access to records of agencies that fall under the governor's office.

Governor's office records are still off-limits to the public.

Louisiana still ranks far behind other states when it comes to openness. The state ranked at the bottom on access to Governor's Office records, according to the Citizens Access Project of the University of Florida.

The new law puts Louisiana nowhere close to the "gold standard" of Florida.

Jindal's executive counsel Jimmy Faircloth testified against legislation by state Rep. Wayne Waddell that would have broken the shield of secrecy.

"I don't think as far as the governor's office we have made much headway," said Waddell, R-Shreveport, "and I don't think they particularly wanted it addressed."

Waddell said he has picked up on a sentiment in other areas too, such as opposition to new restrictions on post-employment opportunities for Governor's Office staffers.

Waddell said it makes one wonder "Do we truly have a gold standard or is it gold-plated?"

Jindal vetoed some bills that opponents said would have a chilling effect on ethics-law enforcement, including one that would have required whistle-blowers to attach their names to complaints.

Jindal also vetoed a handful of bills that carved out exceptions to the ethics code that would have allowed people to engage in conduct otherwise banned by state conflict-of-interest laws.

However, Jindal allowed other bills to become law that allow banned conduct by three lawmakers and/or their relatives — two skirting nepotism laws and another on off-limits business activity.

The biggest exception Jindal signed off on allows members of government boards and commissions to refrain from voting on issues in some situations when personal conflicts of interest arise. Before, appointees had to resign.

Jindal said he will monitor to see if abuses occur, then act.

Today, there is no Louisiana Board of Ethics. All but one member resigned after another new law reduced board powers.

Since the end of June, no enforcement has occurred, no ethics advisory opinions issued, no new investigations launched.

Yet Jindal checked ethics off his list and moved on to other things. Work force development, check. Next up, health care.

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