

The Lens, Bill could end TP's longtime hold on lucrative legal-notice ads (6.4.12)

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Bill could end TP's longtime hold on lucrative legal-notice ads By Tom Gogola, Staff writer

A bill passed by both houses of the Louisiana Legislature and now on its way to the governor's desk could end The Times-Picayune's decades-long monopoly on publishing the lucrative mandatory legal notices from public agencies.

The Times-Picayune's status as the paper of record was untenable after it announced it was scaling back its print run to three times a week this fall. State law previously required that legal notices be published in a daily newspaper.

Like the daily paper, the legal notices in The Times-Picayune could come to an end.

Lawmakers responded last week with a measure governing New Orleans legal notices that deletes almost all references to "daily" newspapers, and potentially gives other local news outlets access to government advertising dollars.

At stake is a reliable advertising base producing up to \$7 million annually, paid by state and local governments to run legal notices in local papers.

The revised public-notice law, House Bill 1144, is now on its way to Gov. Bobby Jindal's desk for his expected approval. It adds language that could benefit The Gambit, the city's alternative weekly.

The law says that weekly newspapers with a circulation of above 30,000 will be eligible to run public notices. Gambit's circulation was around 40,000, according to 2009 figures.

Orleans Parish remains the only parish in Louisiana that requires public notices to run in daily newspapers. The amended law was "condoned by everyone except The Times-Picayune," State Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, said Monday.

Morrell said the lion's share of the money generated by public notices is spent in New Orleans by the city and the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office – up to \$6 million a year in advertising revenue, he said. The rest, between \$500,000 and \$1 million a year, is the state's typical share of public-notice ad buys.

Morrell said "the City Council will decide who the reporter will be," and expected a debate among elected officials over whether The Times-Picayune, The Louisiana Weekly or The Gambit will earn the designation as the official journal.

Ac-cord-ing to mul-ti-ple on-line re-sources, The Louisiana Weekly does not ap-pear to have a cir-cu-la-tion that eclipses even 10,000, let alone 30,000.

State records show that Gam-bit hired Baton Rouge lob-by-ist Thomas Jay Spradley on May 29.

The re-vised pub-lic-no-tice statute was pro-posed and passed both houses by May 31.

Spradley did not re-turn a phone call seek-ing com-ment about his role, if any, in ad-vo-cat-ing for the amended law.

The lob-by-ing group rep-re-sent-ing the state's press isn't wor-ried about the gov-er-nor's veto pen.

"I don't an-tic-i-pate by any stretch that [Jin-dal] is going to veto," said Johnny Koch, a reg-is-tered lob-by-ist with the Louisiana Press As-so-ci-a-tion.