BESE members hope to show board is necessary

By DOUG MYERS

LAFAYETTE — Members of the state's top school board on Wednesday said they expect to convince the full board to investigate Sen. Mike Foster to drop his plan to scrap the board, if he's elected.

And if that doesn't work, members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education said they'll try to convince the full board to reject the constitutional amendment needed for Foster to carry out his plan.

Foster has said the amendment would put the board's policy-making duties under a board of appointees. Most members of BESE are elected.

Foster, R-Franklin, is the gubernatorial front-runner heading into the Nov. 18 runoff election. He repeatedly has stated his intention to abolish BESE if he beats U.S. Rep. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, the other candidate.

In addition to setting policies, BESE decides how to spend nearly $2 billion a year on Louisiana's 1,400-plus public schools.

BESE member Keith Johnson of New Orleans said a new governor, Buddy Roemer expressed similar wishes to abolish the board before Roemer was elected in 1987 and that Roemer later dropped his plan.

With the "proper leadership" on BESE, Johnson said the board should be able to convince Foster that it is in his best interest to work with BESE to accomplish education goals. In fact, Johnson said, even if voters pass a constitutional amendment, it wouldn't go into effect until the end of the upcoming term — in more than four years. "This board will be here whether a constitutional amendment passes or not," Johnson said.

BESE President James Stafford of Monroe said the board will meet with Foster, if he's elected, to explain why the board is needed and why the governor's already has sufficient influence because he appoints three of the 11 BESE members.

Eight members are elected by voters, but BESE members said Foster has to do is win the support of those three elected members — in addition to his three appointees — for his plans to get the necessary six votes to get a measure passed.

"I think the citizens of the state have more interest in the board (the board) being the way it is," Stafford said.

Whatever happens, Lee said, he hopes Foster pushes for "school-based decision-making" and moves away from the Legislature passing mandates on local school districts.

The present system is working because voters get to influence the board's selection of members and board, Stafford said.

BESE member Walter Lee of Shreveport said he's not overly concerned with Foster's plans because voters will have the chance to say if the legislature puts a constitutional amendment on the ballot.

"I'm not sure he (Foster) realizes the governor already has influence," Lee said. "He wants to exercise it, he get's to decide who's going to be on the board. I think the citizens of the state have more interest in the board (the board) being the way it is.

Whatever happens, Lee said, he hopes Foster pushes for "school-based decision-making" and moves away from the Legislature passing mandates on local school districts."