Bill to hike drinking age hits snag in La. House

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Efforts to raise the state's drinking age from 18 to 21 to comply with a federal mandate ran into problems in the Louisiana House on Thursday, with the proposal coming up one vote short of passage.

Proponents said that, if the measure had passed in its current state, it would not have met federal guidelines and the state would still lose some $15 million in federal highway money this year.

All states are under a mandate to raise the drinking age to 21 by Oct. 1, 1986, or face loss of federal highway funds. So far, 29 states have complied.

The House voted 52-44 for the Senate-passed bill after making a series of changes, but 53 votes are required for passage. The bill, SB30 by Sen. Richard Neeson, D-Shreveport, can come up for another

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House vote.

The House on Sunday approved a House bill raising the drinking age. That bill is awaiting action in the Senate.

Rep. Margaret Lowenthal, D-Lake Charles, said the state has a problem with teens who drink and drive. She said there has been a marked reduction in fatalities and injuries caused by teens who drink and drive in states where the 21 age limit has been imposed.

But, House members rebelled against federal involvement in what they consider state affairs.

The House adopted an amendment under which the drinking age would not be increased to 21 until after Congress approves imposition of a federal oil import tax with proceeds divided among the states according to a revenue-sharing plan.

"One blackmail is deserving of another blackmail," said Rep. Quentin Dastugue, R-Metairie, who offered the amendment.

"This is the third time Congress has passed laws mandating we do things or they will withhold funds," Dastugue said.

He said adoption of the amendment would "send a clear message to Congress" that the Legislature does not like being blackmailed with the threat of lost highway dollars.

"They are holding our money," Dastugue said, with House members loudly voicing their agreement. The House voted 51-47 to adopt the amendment.

The House also agreed to exempt military personnel from the law, but proponents said that would make the state law in non-compliance with federal rules.

Before voting on the measure, the House adopted a series of amendments, including another Dastugue amendment that would allow those 18 to 20 at the effective date of the law continue to drink. Dastugue called it a "teen-age grandfather amendment."

Other changes endorsed by the House include:

- Allowing 18- to 21-year-olds to purchase and possess alcoholic beverages in private clubs. The exemption had been taken out by a House committee, with Rep. Donald Ray Kennard, D-Baton Rouge, voicing concerns that lounges around colleges and universities would become private clubs and thus skirt the intent of the law.

The bill sets 21 as the legal age for purchase and possession of alcoholic beverages. However, it exempts those between 18 and 21 for religious and medical purposes as well as on occasions when they are accompanied by a parent, spouse, or guardian or they are drinking in a private residence.

- Providing that the $25 fine levied for violations of the law would go to pay the expenses of the Office of Alcoholic Beverage Control in the enforcement of the duties of the office.

- Making it unlawful persons over 17 and under 18 to purchase or possess alcoholic beverages. Violation would be a misdemeanor subject to a fine of up to $300 or not more than 10 days imprisonment.

Here's how the House voted when it came up one vote short of endorsing increasing the drinking age from 18 to 21:


NOT VOTING (9) - Reps. Baker, Deen, Diez, Forster, Headon, M. Hebert, Irvin, Landrieu and Reilly.

Diez took the microphone after the vote to say that he had voted for the bill but his voting machine had not registered. But, he could not have it registered correctly because of the closeness of the vote.