Curry to withdraw bingo amendments

By GIBBS ADAMS
Advocate staff writer

Councilman Gordon Curry said Tuesday he will abstain from voting and will withdraw his proposed bingo ordinance amendments that would benefit operators of bingo halls, including a corporation wholly owned by Curry's business associate.

Curry and Jimmy Scott acknowledge they are business partners in two other corporations, but not Scott's corporation that operates bingo halls.

Curry said it was not his intent in offering amendments to the new bingo ordinance to help Scott. He said his amendments were aimed at better regulating the bingo business in Baton Rouge.

I told Scott when he got in the bingo business he had to abide strictly by the law...I'm not cutting any corners for him.
— Gordon Curry

To show his motives, the councilman said he will withdraw his amendments at a meeting of the Metro Council's Finance and Executive Committee Wednesday afternoon.

The item is not on the agenda for Wednesday's meeting. Council Administrator Don Nijoka said, pointing out the revised ordinance has not yet been introduced to the full council before going to committee.

Curry also said he will abstain from voting on the bingo ordinance before the council because of his business association with Scott.

The city-parish Code of Ethics prohibits elected officials from participating in decisions that benefit those with whom the officials have a business relationship.

Although Curry was not a member of the council's Bingo Application Review Committee, he was present at a June 3 committee meeting in which Councilman David Braud got the committee to recommend changes that would more than double the amount of rent bingo hall operators can collect from charitable organizations.

The rental fee of $1,300 per day is about half of what some operators had been collecting from charitable organizations under the old bingo ordinance.

Scott said he owns the LANSU Corp., which operates bingo halls on Florida Boulevard and Airline Highway.

Curry and Scott said they are associated in two other corporations — Scott's Investments, which is working with a Texas corporation in petroleum refining in Texas, and WASP, a corporation engaged in catfish farming in East Feliciana Parish.

Curry said the new BMW automobile he has been driving recently belongs to Scott Investments.

The tightened bingo ordinance took effect June 1, but no enforcement mechanism has yet been established.

After its adoption at the urging of Council member Pearl George, the council's bingo committee two days later recommended the changes that Curry and Braud proposed.

The committee recommended revisions that Assistant Parish Attorney Tony Lawrence said "substantially weakened" the new bingo ordinance and will make enforcement more difficult.

One of the changes the committee recommended was to raise rent charitable organizations can be charged from $550 per day to $650 per session. Number of games per session was amended upward from 14 to 18, with two sessions permitted in a single day.

At present, some bingo halls operate as many as four sessions in a day and collect rent on a per-session basis. State law restricts bingo gaming by any given organization to six days per month.

Curry said he assisted Lawrence in preparing the bingo ordinance and his only interest was in seeing fairness to everybody concerned, including charitable organizations and bingo operators.

He pointed out the amendments also cut bingo operators to a 15 percent markup on supplies, assuring that some bingo hall operators spend 18 cents for supplies that they sell for 90 cents.

Curry disputes whether the Code of Ethics applies to his conduct since he and Scott are not associated in the bingo business.

Without naming them, Scott said he had contributed to other council members' political campaigns, and so had a lot of other businessmen.

"I told Scott when he got in the bingo business he had to abide strictly by the law...I'm not cutting any corners for him," Curry said.

Curry said Scott's reports filed with the city-parish revenue department as a requirement of the bingo ordinance are in better detail than others, and Scott said he uses a computer to keep track of each club's itemized report.

He said Curry's amendments to the bingo ordinance "kept it fair" for everybody.