Drinking age bill clears panel

By MARSHA SHULER
Capitol news bureau

A bill increasing the state’s legal drinking age to 21 cleared a Senate panel Monday, but its sponsor said it is so weak the state might as well not have a law on the books.

“We have watered it down so much it is meaningless,” said state Sen. Richard Neeson, D-Shreveport, before the Senate Transportation, Highways and Public Works Committee approved the heavily amended measure.

The bill, SB11, now heads to the Senate floor.

The Neeson bill increases the legal age for possession and purchase of alcohol from 18 to 21 to comply with a federal law. The federal law requires states to adopt the 21 limit or face loss of certain federal highway funds.

An attempt to increase the drinking age during the last regular session was defeated.

Neeson said the state needs to pass the legislation for safety reasons because it will help reduce traffic fatalities caused by teen-age drunken drivers. In addition, he said the state needs the $15 million in federal highway money that will be lost without the change.

But, Sen. Don Kelly, D-Natchitoches, said the money is not available anyway because the U.S. Congress has not passed the federal highway act.

“So, this year we have not lost a dime,” he said.

The bill as it went into committee contained a number of concessions made to opponents in the 1986 regular session of the Legislature, including a series of exemptions that allow those between 18 and 21 to drink under

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certain circumstances.

Those circumstances include when an 18-year-old is in the company of a parent, guardian or spouse over the age of 21; when they are in private residences or private clubs; or when alcohol is being consumed for religious or medical reasons.

“There are so many exemptions we can drive a truck down the road and not break a bottle,” Neeson said. But he said the exemptions are necessary to get the bill approved by the Legislature.

Before approving the measure, the committee made the bill even weaker, reducing the fine for violations of the law from $300 to $50 and specified that the violation would be handled like a traffic offense.

“It’s lowering the seriousness of this particular problem. We’re reducing it from a traumatic experience to an inconvenience,” Neeson said.

“I really fear we are setting up Louisiana as a bloody border state even with a law,” said Nancy Camel, executive director of the Safety Council of Baton Rouge.

Sen. Ron Landry, D-LaPlace, author of the changes, said he sought the amendment because he thinks the $300 fine is out of line for simple possession of alcohol. He said youngsters cannot afford the big fine.

The committee also adopted two other changes: one that declares the state law null and void if Congress repeals the federal mandate or the U.S. Supreme Court declares it unconstitutional; and another that allows those 18 years old at the time the law passes to continue to drink until Oct. 1, 1988.

Committee members said it would make more sense not to include the October expiration date, but staff members said the date is included in federal legislation.