Drinking Age Hike Cleared

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Senators are going to be asked to raise the legal drinking age in Louisiana by a year to 19 but just when the request will come is open to question.

Sen. Richard Neeson of Shreveport, author of the measure, says he is undecided whether to quickly move ahead with the bill before opponents can mount a big lobbying campaign — or wait a couple of days to try to build more support.

His measure won 3-2 approval Tuesday from the Senate Judiciary B Committee.

“I think our chances are about 50-50 on the Senate floor,” Neeson said of the bill. “When people weigh all the evidence, I think it will be hard to vote against it.”

In pushing the bill in committee, Neeson noted that Louisiana is one of only five states where the legal drinking age for beer, wine and liquor is 18. The others are Hawaii, Vermont, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

Twice the Senate committee defeated attempts to kill the Neeson bill or keep it in committee, both times on 3-2 votes.

No one spoke for or against the bill in committee except the author and some committee members, but Neeson said there has been a behind-the-scenes lobbying effort against the measure.

“They didn’t come in to speak against it, but have been working the halls trying to get it killed,” he said.

When asked who they were he said the liquor lobby.

The major reason for the bill, he said, was that many 18-year-olds drink and drive and cause a disproportionate share of traffic accidents and fatalities.

“Young people are killing each other en masse because of drinking and driving,” Neeson told the panel.

He added that fatal accidents involving teenagers dropped dramatically in states where the drinking age has been moved to 19, 20 or even 21.

George Brown, lobbyist for the Beer Industry League and the Wine and Spirits Foundation of Louisiana, said later his groups probably will oppose the measure.

“You just can’t enforce it,” Brown said. “I don’t think the 18-year-old age (law) is being enforced.”

Sen. Hank Braden IV of New Orleans said he couldn’t go along with the measure unless Congress upheld the age for the military draft.

“When a person reaches 18, he’s considered to be an adult in this state for all intents and purposes,” he said. “I don’t see much difference between a mature 18-year-old and an immature 18-year-old or an immature 40-year-old.”

He noted that Louisiana has had an 18-year-old drinking age since 1948, and the only reason other states have changed theirs was political whim.

Sen. Ned Randolph of Alexandria and Mike Cross of Baton Rouge voted for the bill, while Sens. Braden and Ron Landry of LaPlace were opposed.