Drinking age hike rejected

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Louisiana's state representatives Wednesday voted against raising the drinking age in the state to 21, despite the threatened loss of federal highway funds.

On a 36-32 vote, the House voted to delay action on Rep. Jon Johnson's bill that would gradually raise the legal drinking age from 18 to 21 over the next three years. The session is in its final days and the delay means certain death for the New Orleans Democrat's bill.

Louisiana, according to Johnson, is one of only three states where the drinking age is as low as 18.

The U.S. Senate has approved legislation that would allow the federal government to withhold a portion of a state's highway money if the state has a legal drinking age below 21. The legislation appears to be headed for final approval by the U.S. House. That is one reason, Johnson said, that Louisiana should fall in line.

But Rep. Emile "Peppi" Bruneau, I-New Orleans, said the state should not cave in to pressure from Congress. The law that would withhold funds from the states, he said, "is patently unconstitutional and election-year foolishness."

Johnson said his bill also would save lives. He pointed to statistics showing a decline in alcohol-related automobile fatalities involving young people in states that have increased the drinking age.

"It is for those reasons, in addition to the mandatory requirement that the federal government is about to impose upon us, that I bring this legislation to you," he said.

Rep. Ralph Miller, D-Norco, joined Bruneau in opposing the bill. "We are continuing and continuing and continuing to stifle the rights of individuals by legislation of this type," he said.

Then the House voted 36-32 to return the bill to the legislative calender. The move means the measure has virtually no chance of being reconsidered by the House and making it through the Senate by the end of the current legislative session, which lawmakers hope to wind up this weekend.

Johnson had pushed the bill through the House Criminal Justice Committee Tuesday. It was the second such measure to be handled by that panel. The first was killed on the House floor.