Drinking age hike endorsed

By MARSHA SHULER
Capitol news bureau

Although some lawmakers called it blackmail, the Louisiana House voted Sunday to comply with a federal mandate to increase the state’s drinking age from 18 to 21 or face the loss of federal highway dollars.


Donelon called it a “test vote” on the legislation because it shows there probably are enough votes to pass a similar Senate-passed bill which is awaiting final passage in the House. Similar measures have failed in the House in years past.

Donelon told his House colleagues that the state stands to lose $90 million over a three-year period if it does not comply with the federal mandate for a 21-year-old drinking age.

But, he said, “More important is the fact that teen-age lives will be saved and have been saved in every state that has followed the change.”

Rep. Margaret Lowenthal, D-Lake Charles, who has filed similar legislation, said, “It’s time for Louisiana to do something about the drinking problem with teen-agers, and this bill will help us to do something about it.”

But opponents argued that 18-year-olds are considered old enough to vote, serve in the military, get married, enter into a contract, own a lounge and be elected to the Legislature.

Rep. Robert Adley, D-Bossier City, said the legislation “creates second-class citizens.”

Rep. Frank Patti, D-Belle Chasse, said the federal government is using “scare tactics” to get states to raise the drinking age. “I don’t think they are going to do it (withhold federal funds),” he said.

At Donelon’s request, the House amended the bill to make it conform to a Senate bill by Sen. Richard Neeson, D-Shreveport.

But the House also voted to change the bill to exempt military personnel from the 21-year-old drinking age — a
Drinking

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move which Donelon said puts the bill at odds with federal guidelines.

Before approving the measure, the House rejected an attempt to allow those youths aged 18, 19 and 20 — people now allowed to drink — to keep that right.

Rep. Quentin Dastugue, R-Metairie, called it "a teen-age grandfather clause."

"Why are we denying rights to a majority of individuals that don't abuse the right between 18 and 21?" he asked.

Donelon said the exemption would make the legislation unacceptable to federal officials and jeopardize $15 million in federal highway funds this year, $30 million next year and $45 million in the third year.

"For those of you interested in transportation funds, you are looking at $90 million. That's the fiscal note on Mr. Dastugue's amendment," he said.

The House rejected the amendment on a 53-39 vote.

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The bill sets 21 as the age for both 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 and drinking in private residences.

Under the bill, the penalty for violation of the drinking age would be a fine of $25. The funds raised would be used to enforce state alcohol laws.

Here's how the House voted Sunday to raise the minimum drinking age to 21:


NOT VOTING (12) — Ater, Benoit, Copelin, DeWitt, Heaton, D. Hebert, C.R. Jones, Morrell, Reilly, Scott, Sittig, Thibodeaux.