Drunk Driving Bills Heard By Committee

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - The new push for tougher laws to stop drunks from driving has reached a Senate committee, that is almost evenly split on whether a jail sentence should be required in some cases.

The Judiciary C Committee heard a package of bills Tuesday by Sen. Richard Neeson of Shreveport but took no final action. That will come next week.

The committee did make some changes in the bills, amending the measures by close votes, most of the time by 4-3 decisions with the chairman, Sen. Fritz Windhorst of Gretna, breaking the tie each time.

In most cases the amendments lessened the penalties.

However, the panel didn't get to testimony from dozens of members of a new organization, Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Committee members decided to hear testimony and take final action at its next meeting.

Similar bills authored in the House already have been cleared by a House committee and are awaiting floor action.

The Treen administration, which has vowed to take a tough stand on drunk driving, has decided it doesn't want required jail sentences for first offenders.

One of the Senate bills was amended to read like a House bill backed by Gov. Dave Treen. That measure calls for jail sentences for first offenders, but allows a judge to suspend the sentence if the violator does community service work and participates in a substance abuse program and a driver education program.

Edgar Mouton, Treen's legal counsel, sat in on the committee meeting and said he agreed with some local officials that a forced jail sentence wouldn't accomplish anything.

Local jails are already overcrowded and district attorneys would just lessen the charge of drunk driving to reckless driving to keep jails from being stacked, he said.

The administration apparently is not committed to building all of the jails that would be needed.

Sen. William Jefferson of New Orleans was strongly opposed to the concept of forced jail sentences for some offenses related to drunk driving, contending that alcoholism is a disease, not a crime.

The Neeson package also includes a bill to require at least a week in jail for anyone caught driving under suspension or revocation of license due to a drunk driving conviction.

And another would create a new offense - vehicle homicide. Anyone driving under the influence who caused the death of another in a traffic accident could go to jail for up to five years.