Keith: Legislators want battle over creationism

SHREVEPORT (UPI) — Opponents of the state's creation-science law will not be able to repeal the measure because legislators want battles over the controversial issue to be settled in court, the law's author said Tuesday.

Sen. Bill Keith's comments came in response to statements by at least one senator and a civil liberties union official that Keith's defeat in a re-election bid would make the law an easy target for repeal.

Keith, D-Mooringsport, lost in a runoff last Saturday to Shreveport City Councilman Gregory Tarver. Keith pushed the creation-science law through the Legislature in 1981, but it has remained tied up in court battles.

The law requires schools teaching Darwin's theory of evolution also to instruct students on the biblical version of creation — that man was placed on earth in his present form by a supreme being.

"More than likely, legislators are going to want to see it settled in court," Keith said. "This is the opinion I've picked up from many legislators."

The law now sits in the New Orleans court of U.S. District Judge Adrian Duplantier for a determination on its constitutionality.

The Louisiana Supreme Court earlier settled one question by ruling that only the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education had such power. Duplantier has not set a date to consider arguments on the federal question of whether the law violates the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

Sen. Sydney Nelson, D-Shreveport, said Keith's defeat may make it easier for opponents to win a repeal of the law.

"The other legislators who voted against it will know he's not there to fight for it," Nelson said.

Martha Kegel, head of the Louisiana arm of the American Civil Liberties Union, said Keith's defeat "clearly sets the stage for a repeal bill."

"A lot of them (legislators) backed it because they had respect for him," Ms. Kegel said. "Now that he's been turned out of office, it's easier for them to repeal it."

But Keith said opponents would not be able to muster enough votes to throw out the law.

"There are going to be some legislators who will try to repeal it, but I don't think they can do it," he said. "I think the feeling is going to be, let's go ahead and test it in the court and see what happens there."

Keith said he would continue to fight to keep the law on the books.

"I would have continued through the courts whether elected or not," he said. "The election has no effect."

Louisiana is the only state with a creation-science law. A similar law in Arkansas was thrown out in early 1982 by a federal judge who found it unconstitutional.