Lawmakers water down DWI bill

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Baton Rouge (AP) — A bill establishing a $10 fine for riding around with an alcoholic drink in your vehicle could wind up watering down tougher laws already on the books in various cities and parishes.

Some members of the House transportation committee made it clear Monday they would rather not deal with a bill punishing just for riding around with a cold beer.

But failure to approve an open container law that satisfied federal government mandates would lead to the loss of $7.6 million in highway construction money by 2002. The bill’s sponsor, Reggie Dupre, D-Houma, said that was his reason for pushing the bill.

Creative accounting could overcome that, some opponents of the bill suggested.

“The money is not an issue. It can be shifted around,” said Charles Young, lobbyist for alcoholic beverage license holders in Louisiana.

Rep. Mitch Theriot, noted that the state does not necessarily lose the $7.6 million. It would simply have to be earmarked for highway safety programs. With the right budget maneuvers, it could even wind up with state police for enforcement programs, Theriot suggested.

Dupre said he worried that the federal government would not look kindly on such budget shifts.

Committee members finally approved the bill, but cut the proposed fine from $25 to $10, a level Dupre said would meet federal requirements.

Cathy Childers, spokeswoman for Louisiana’s chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said that could actually weaken ordinances in some, if not all, of the more than 200 Louisiana cities and parishes that already have such a law. The bill contains a provision pre-empting local laws.

A call to two cities, Lafayette and Monroe, found that both have heavier fines. Monroe, which bans open containers in cars, on streets and on sidewalks, provides for fines of as much as $500. In Lafayette, anyone caught with an open container in a car, when no accident is involved, faces $85 in fines and court costs.

Family’s lives changed by drunk driver

“‘My father was one of those people who never intended to retire because he loved his job and going to work each day.’”

Spring Humble of Abbeville

Her father was killed by a drunk driver

Assistant District Attorney James McClelland said Monday he will ask 16th Judicial District Judge Carl Williams to impose the maximum sentence. Vehicular homicide carries a sentence of two to 15 years in prison and a fine of between $2,000 and $15,000.

“This is one of the most aggravating cases I’ve ever seen,” McClelland said. “Mr. Harding was drunk, driving on the wrong side of a four-lane divided highway and driving under suspension from a previous conviction for refusing to take a breathalyzer test in another drunk-driving case.”

Meaux’s daughter-in-law, Juanita Meaux, said Monday that Jennifer Holley of Baton Rouge, a member of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, also is scheduled to appear in court today and give a statement.

“My father-in-law really loved life, he loved his family, and was loved and admired by many people in the community,” Meaux said. “It’s hard to describe the effect this has had on the whole family. There’s an empty place in our hearts that can never be filled.”

Humble said even if Harding gets the maximum penalty today at his sentencing, “he’ll have another chance at life when he gets out. My father doesn’t get another chance. We don’t get another chance to be the family we were before. Fifteen years for something that, to us, is the same thing as murder.”

The Legislature now is considering a slate of bills to tighten drunk driving laws. “It’s an uphill battle,” Humble said. “People in general don’t tend to take this issue seriously. Unfortunately, it’s only when they, a family member or close friend is killed or badly injured by a drunk driver that it really hits home, and then it’s too late.”