Legislators, lobbyists drawn back into fray

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During the 1991 battle in the Legislature over abortion, many politicians and lobbyists assumed high-profile stands on the divisive issue.

The subsequent vote for one of the nation’s toughest abortion laws — and the following override of then Gov. Buddy Roemer’s veto — removed the threat from the state’s legislative arena.

But Operation Rescue’s planned street protests in Baton Rouge this week have drawn some outspoken legislators and lobbyists back into the fray, forcing them to consider how to support the groups that will be jostling on the front lines.

Conservatives who backed various bills restricting abortions must weigh the goals of Operation Rescue against the disruptive tactics its members use.

To state Reps. Louis “Woody” Jenkins, D-Baton Rouge, and Sam Theriot, D-Abbeville — who each sponsored restrictive abortion bills in 1991 — the decision is clear. Both say Operation Rescue has the right to demonstrate, and both back the protests.

Jenkins, who spearheaded measures to outlaw the rape and incest exemptions of the bill that eventually passed, said he’ll be out of town during the protests.

“Jenkins said he wasn’t involved in Operation Rescue planning, but sides with the demonstrators in their effort to ‘try to encourage people to choose life.’

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“It’s a worthwhile goal to try to protect unborn children,” Jenkins said. The burden of the protests may cause police and the city-parish are similar to problems caused by other demonstrations, he said. "It's just the cost of doing business, as far as the government is concerned," he said.

Theriot, who sponsored the bill that eventually became law, agreed. Theriot compared the pro-life protests to civil disobedience during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Theriot said he’d been “on a religious retreat and hadn’t been made aware of any particulars in Operation Rescue’s plans. He said he'd like to be involved "in some capacity," if nothing else through supporting prayer.

Theriot said as long as the protesters remain non-violent, he approves of the demonstrations.

"That’s what our country is founded on," Theriot said.

But Eagle Forum — a conservative group that lobbied heavily for Jenkins’ strict bill — differs from the two pro-life legislators when it comes to street protests.

“We do not engage in civil disobedience at all," said Sandra McDade, state chairwoman for Eagle Forum.

McDade said while Operation Rescue’s goals are worthy, Eagle Forum follows a policy of “petitioning” the government in legislative bodies and courts instead of demonstrating.

McDade said she’s afraid the protests will focus negative publicity on the pro-life cause.

“We’ve made so much progress in this state," McDade said. "I almost see Operation Rescue as counter-productive."

On the pro-choice side, some local politicians are voicing their opposition to Operation Rescue but say they won’t actively participate in guarding the Delta Women’s Clinic, where the protests are expected to be held.

State Rep. Melvin "Kip" Holden, D-Baton Rouge, bristled at comparisons between Operation Rescue and civil rights demonstrations. Operation Rescue’s tactics are more antagonistic and confrontational, according to Holden, who said he doesn’t plan to take part in pro-choice counterdemonstrations or in defending the clinic.

State Sen. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, said he is strongly pro-choice but doesn’t plan to be involved. Fields said he thinks Operation Rescue members should protest for better pre-natal care or adequate housing for children instead of only concerning themselves with unborn fetuses.

But Fields defended their right to demonstrate, noting that he voted against an unsuccessful resolution that would have asked Operation Rescue to cancel its scheduled protests.