STATE NEWS

House panel OKs bills to scrap N.O. notarial archives post

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Baton Rouge — A House committee voted Tuesday to do away with the controversial job of custodian of notarial archives in New Orleans, but left it up to the full House to determine who should take over the job.

The House Committee on Civil Law and Procedure, sifting through several bills to modify or abolish the office, approved bills by Reps. Sherman Copelin and Louis Ivon, both D-New Orleans.

The bills go to the full House.

Ivon’s bill would place the office under the recorder of mortgages and allocate excess money generated by the custodian to civil district court judges.

But Ivon said he will amend the bill to funnel the excess money to the city’s treasury.

Copelin’s bill, which would channel net office revenues to the city, was at first killed on a 7-6 vote, then resurrected and given unanimous support after Ivon’s bill passed 7-5.

The bill was revived after city lobbyist Louis Charbonnet III asked New Orleans members of the panel to urge another vote.

Copelin’s bill would abolish the office and place it under the clerk of civil district court, and calls for a commission to study options for the office, including merging it with the recorder of mortgages and register of conveyances.

Copelin’s bill would also require hiring a professional archivist for $35,000 a year and an administrative assistant who also would be paid $35,000.

The Senate late Tuesday approved a bill by Sen. Cecil Picard, D-Maurice, to cap the custodian’s salary at $35,000, set up a committee to study the office and channel net revenues to the city of New Orleans for the civil courts. That bill goes to the House, where a committee earlier Tuesday killed an almost identical measure by Rep. Mitch Landrieu, D-New Orleans.

The offices of custodian, recorder and register all file property documents and collect fees on real estate transactions, functions performed by the clerks of court in other parishes. The recorder and register are elected posts, and the fees they collect go to a fund controlled by the civil district court judges, who pay the set salaries for the officials. But the custodian is named by the governor and can do anything he wants with fees after paying office expenses.

Former Gov. Edwin W. Edwards named Nat G. Kiefer Jr., the son of a political ally, to the job in 1984, and Kiefer pocketed more than $500,000 in office proceeds over the next four years. Gov. Roemer picked John J. Hainkel III, the son of a political ally, for the job this year, but drew protests that the appointment contradicted Roemer’s reform agenda. An agreement followed to limit Hainkel’s salary to $35,000 a year and to study reform of the office.