Local representatives battle for USL name change

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BATON ROUGE - Three Lafayette representatives are preparing to fight an old battle -- a name change for USL -- but they're trying some new ammunition.

In past years, LSU supporters have short-circuited name change bills. The fight has spilled over into other subjects and stirred numerous arguments over seemingly innocuous legislation.

But Rep. Jerry LeBlanc says this year things might be different. LeBlanc has included in his name change legislation a provision that he says will protect LSU from any possible threats to its position as flagship of state universities.

The bill's first purpose is to designate Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College as the premier flagship university for the state of Louisiana.

Its second purpose is to create the University of Louisiana at Lafayette -- if USL President Ray Authement requests it -- and the third is to allow other schools to change their names to University of Louisiana with a city designation.

LeBlanc said he and co-authors Don Bacque and Don Higginbotham are concerned about the uncertainty of the administration bill creating a single board of higher education.

"It might not pass at the polls," LeBlanc said, leaving LSU without official designation and erasing USL's chances at a name change.

One of the provisions of the single board bill is the creation of the University of Louisiana system with availability of a name change.

Also, the tier system for categorizing higher education institutions according to mission might not be properly understood, he said.

The bill "will provide a framework and foundation, at least statutorily, to protect LSU," LeBlanc said.

"It should not be misconstrued that this is a bill that pits one university against another," he said. The competition among universities of the early 1980s was "detrimental to them all." Now, "all institutions must work together if they are to survive.

The previous fight resulted because others "felt that it was something decided behind closed doors and that a slick deal was made," LeBlanc said. This bill is "out in the open."

Rep. Sean Reilly of Baton Rouge says he considers a name change "a little bit frivolous" when higher education is faced with "problems of a grave nature."

Adequate funding and professor pay raises should be in the forefront, Reilly said. "I hope we don't get distracted quibbling over USL."
names. I hope we keep the big picture in sight and that’s adequate funding and proper governance of higher education.”

Bacque said he believes the bill “gives LSU what LSU wants — premier university status — and gives USL what it wants — the ability to change its name to the University of Louisiana. It’s a good compromise.”

Responding to Reilly’s statement that a name change bill is “frivolous,” Bacque said “LSU is the one that wants premier status. If Sean thinks that is frivolous, I wish he would come out and tell us.”

Higginbotham said he does not believe LSU will fight the single board bill but he is not sure the name change will have a chance this session.

“I personally don’t see the name change as a viable issue this year,” he said. “I think that it’s something that the Acadiana delegation is concerned with and that we feel is needed and we need to be constantly working toward that goal. I just don’t think that this is going to be our year.”

Higginbotham said he is “more concerned with the single board for the benefit of USL than I would be for the name change.”

The bill, though, “may give us some negotiating power to see that the tier system is set into place.”