The Senate Transportation, Highways and Public Works Committee passed a bill Wednesday to raise the legal drinking age in Louisiana to 21, but not before the bill was heavily amended to reduce penalties for violations.

Although he would have liked to see a more stringent measure passed, the bill's author, Sen. Richard G. Neeson, D-Shreveport, said the amendments were needed to give SB 30 a chance to get through the Legislature.

Calling the measure an important first step in the process, Neeson said the bill becomes law, he can come back and add measures to make it stronger in future years.

The bill has been put high on Monday's agenda for the full Senate. Neeson's original bill simply would have raised the legal drinking age from 18 to 21 and provided stiff penalties for violations — fines as high as $300 or jail terms of up to 10 days.

The amended version, adopted by a 4-2 committee vote, would set the maximum fine at $25.

Amendments to the original bill also provide a handful of exemptions to the 21-year-old age limit. The amendments would allow 18- and 19-year-olds to consume alcoholic beverages during religious ceremonies, when prescribed by a doctor, while in the company of a parent or guardian or while in private clubs.

If adopted by the Legislature and signed by the governor, Neeson’s bill would take effect at 11:59 p.m. Sept. 30, 1986.

“I am not pleased with it in terms of its being stringent,” Neeson said after the committee vote. “But, from the practical side of what it takes to get this bill through the Legislature.... We’re having to drag Louisiana and the Legislature into the ’80s with kicking and screaming.”

Neeson said legislators have two reasons to vote for the measure — it will reduce traffic fatalities and accidents among Louisiana’s teen-agers and it will head off a reduction in the number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities, Neeson said.

If legislators are not swayed by the argument that the higher drinking age will save lives, they should consider the impact on federal funds of leaving the drinking age at 18, he said.

Louisiana could lose 5 percent of its highway funds next year and 10 percent the following year if the drinking age is not raised — that would cut more than $15 million from next year's federal highway subsidy, Neeson said.

Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Alexandria, said he doesn’t like the idea of the federal government using a cut-off of funds to coerce the Legislature into action. Besides, McPherson said, he doesn’t like loopholes in SB 30 — like excluding from public possession alcohol consumed in private clubs.


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Civic Foundation, which fears more Sunday sales would take more employees away from their families on the traditional day of religious worship. Ward said he prefers Nicholson’s bill to other, more sweeping attacks on the law, but he said his organization plans to “go down fighting.”

The committee amended Nicholson’s bill to prohibit anyone from forcing a store to open on Sunday. The amendment was aimed at small stores in shopping centers, many of which require all stores to open when one store in the center opens.

Nicholson said he will try to remove the amendment when the bill gets to the Senate floor.

The committee rejected another bill, SB324 by Sen. Cliff Newman, D-Lake Charles, that would have reversed the procedure of Nicholson’s bill by repealing the state law and allowing local voters to reimpose their own blue laws if they wish.

The retailers opposed that bill because it would allow Sunday sales statewide at one time, forcing them start local drives to reinstate the law.