Roemer vetoes abortion bill

By DOUG MYERS
Capitol news bureau

Gov. Buddy Roemer ended almost three weeks of waiting Friday when he vetoed a tough anti-abortion bill that he said did not meet minimum requirements he established months ago.

Anti-abortion lawmakers Rep. Louis "Woody" Jenkins, D-Baton Rouge, and Sen. Mike Cross, D-Baker, immediately urged state lawmakers to come to Baton Rouge for a veto session in an attempt to ensure anti-abortion legislation becomes law this year.

Under the state constitution, an automatic veto session is conducted 40 days after final adjournment of a regular session, unless a majority of lawmakers in either house say they don't want one. If a veto session is held, it would be Aug. 12.

The bill Jenkins and Cross are targeting won't be Rep. James David Cain's converted anti-flag-burner bill vetoed by Roemer on Friday, but Jenkins' stringent HB1437.

Roemer vetoed the Jenkins bill in the closing days of the session, and anti-abortion forces fell three votes shy in the Senate of overriding Roemer's veto of that bill.

The bill Roemer vetoed on Friday contains exceptions for rape, incest and when the life of the mother is endangered. The only exception in the Jenkins bill is for the life of the mother.

In modern Louisiana history, a veto session has never been held.

Roemer said he considers himself pro-life and does not condone abortion on demand or abortion as a method of birth control.

Roemer indicated the latest bill he vetoed contained adequate provisions to allow abortions in cases of rape and when the life of the mother is in jeopardy.

However, Roemer said, the bill treated rape cases "unreasonably and unsatisfactorily."

The bill would have allowed abortions in cases where rapes were reported within seven days, and Roemer said that reporting was "totally acceptable and inviting and unrealistic."

Further, Roemer said, the bill shuttered because it was hastily drafted in the closing days of the session, was vague and was "mere on essential points" — such as whether the woman getting the abortion could be prosecuted.

"This veto will not end the debate," Roemer said. "Nor should it. An issue this personal, this complex, demands the best. This is not the best."

Because the Legislature has been unsuccessful in drafting a bill that would earn his approval, Roemer said he might file his own bill during the next session.

"But even that decision has not been made," Roemer said.

Roemer said he did not base his decision on a poll. He said he did not have his office conduct one.

And, Roemer said neither adamant anti-abortion nor adamant pro-choice activists swayed his decision.

"It was ultimately personal," Roemer said. "He said he listened to women more than to men on the subject.

"One of the things I've tried to be sensitive on is the voice of women on this issue," Roemer said. "It might serve as well, legislators and governors, who tend to be predominantly male, to take time to listen to the viewpoint of women."

Roemer said he had concerns with the bill because only aggravated rape would be excepted and victims of simple rape would have no recourse. Simple rape is sexual intercourse when a woman is not capable of resisting — for example, if she is intoxicated.

"One of the most burdensome things about the bill that I vetoed today is that it did not listen (to women) at all," Roemer said. "It's like simple rape was non-existent. It was just like a woman was mentally retarded she had no right and was fair game. How insensitive can you be?"

Roemer said if the Legislature calls a veto session, he will.

"It is their prerogative," Roemer said. "It is their responsibility."

Cross, a leading anti-abortion proponent in the Senate, said the Legislature will be more prone to override Roemer's veto this time because they now better understand Roemer is not really "pro-life."

But Roemer said he is not concerned with labels.

"Frankly, the labels aren't important," Roemer said. "I call it pro-life. I call it that. I call it American."

"The governor wanted a bill with exceptions," Cross said. "He got a bill that was