Senate votes to hike legal drinking age

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Under the threat of losing millions of dollars in federal highway funds, the Senate agreed Monday that Louisiana should join the 49 other states in raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 21.

The vote was 25-12, sending the bill, SB 30 by Sen. Richard Neeson, D-Shreveport, to the House for further action.

The bill, which imposes a maximum penalty of a $25 fine, now goes to the House. If the bill wins final passage and is signed into law, persons between 18 and 21 would still be able to consume alcoholic beverages legally under some circumstances.

The bill would allow them to drink during religious ceremonies, when prescribed by a doctor, while in the company of a parent or guardian, or in private clubs and in their homes.

The effective date is 11:59 p.m. Sept. 30, 1986, the last date given by the federal government for states to comply with the new mandate.

The senators defeated an attempt by Sen. Tom Casey, R-New Orleans, to tack on a “grandfather clause” so that those who are now legally drinking wouldn’t be affected by the bill.

But the senators rejected the amendment 21-15 after proponents of the bill said that the proposed legislation was already in the weakest form acceptable by the federal government.

The federal government threatens to cut back on federal highway funds if the law isn’t in place by Oct. 1.

Neeson said the result of increasing the legal drinking age would be to save lives as well as to avert loss of federal highway funds.

“I really think it will save lives,” Neeson said.

Neeson said failure to pass a bill acceptable to the federal government...
would result in a $15 million loss in federal highway funds the first year, $30 million the second year and another $30 million the third year.

“Don’t say you never took a bribe,” said Sen. Anthony Guarisco, D-Morgan City, directing his comments to those who support the bill in exchange for federal highway funds.

Guarisco said the bill would take away the rights of those who are considered adults under the law.

“The history of this country has been one of expansion of rights — not the contraction of rights,” Guarisco said.

Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset, who called the bill “silly,” said the state would lose money either way, because there was a projected $30 million loss in sales and alcoholic beverage tax collections should the bill become law. He said that was the figure cited in an LSU study.

Many states have raised the minimum drinking age from 18 to 21, and the impact in those states has been a 6 percent to 13 percent reduction in the number of alcohol-related fatalities, Neeson said.

Here is how the Senators voted on the bill:


Not voting (2) — Sens. Bagneris and Chabert.