



# COMMENTARY

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## **PAR SAYS HOUSE EXPENSE PROPOSAL OFF BASE**

A current proposal would give the Louisiana House of Representatives statutory authority to set its own members' office expense allowances by rule. A House rule does not require Senate approval and is not subject to the governor's veto. Ironically, a House committee tacked the proposal onto a bill to statutorily limit vouchered office expenses for Senators. Under the statutory limit, the Senate would have to change state law with the approval of both the House and the governor to increase the expense allowance.

The House committee action is actually an attempt to legitimize the existing House practice. In 1998, the House quietly adopted a rule giving its executive committee authority to establish an annual allotment to cover certain vouchered office and travel expenses previously reimbursed on a case-by-case basis as approved by the House Speaker. The committee, also with little fanfare, set the maximum monthly allotment for each member at \$1,500 per month, or \$18,000 per year. This is in addition to a \$500 per month vouchered expense allowance already provided by law.

Senators also receive supplemental office and travel expense reimbursements in addition to the \$500 per month provided by law. However, the Senate President approves each request. Some Senators felt the House members might be getting more and questioned the legality of the House rule on expense allocation. As a result, SB 1064 was introduced to replace the supplemental expenses by increasing the statutory \$500 monthly allowance to \$1,200 for members of both houses.

**(MORE)**

## PAR Says, Add One

The Senate removed the House members from the proposed \$1,200 per month statutory limit after they objected to being included. They apparently preferred to continue the \$2,000 per month combined allowance to which they have become accustomed.

The House committee amendment to SB 1064 would legitimize a legally questionable approach to setting expense reimbursements. It would provide different approaches for setting expenses for the House and the Senate. The House would continue to set its own expense limits without the checks and balances normally applied to spending decisions. The Senate expense limit could only be changed by law.

SB 1064 is now awaiting hearing on the House floor. Passage would send it back to the Senate for concurrence. PAR is not suggesting the appropriate amount for vouchered office expenses. Whatever the amount is, it is imperative that it be established openly by state law with all the relevant checks and balances. The expense-by-rule provision clearly should not be given the backing of state law. The process for determining compensation and expenses for Senators and Representatives should be the same. That process should allow the public to easily determine how much legislators are supposed to receive. This could be accomplished by placing the expense limits in law for both houses.