

Hill Conferees Postpone Final Action

Veto of Information Bill Is Hinted

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House and Senate conferees reluctantly postponed final action on an expanded freedom of information bill yesterday afternoon after hearing from the Justice Department that President Ford might veto the measure.

The conference, which had previously agreed on all but one section, was meeting to resolve differences on a provision setting penalties for officials who wrongfully withhold public documents.

Yesterday morning, however, Deputy Attorney General Laurence H. Silberman telephoned several House conferees to warn that other provisions might be unacceptable to Mr. Ford. Sen. Edward M.

Kennedy (D-Mass.), one of the conferees, said he got a similar message from Attorney General William B. Sazbe.

The bill, under consideration since 1972, would expand the 1966 Freedom of Information Act by shortening the deadline for agencies to reply to requests, giving courts power to review security classifications, and placing more of a burden on officials who withhold information.

The Justice Department had criticized certain provisions, particularly one broadening access to investigatory files except where the government can show potential damage to law enforcement. Supporters say this is needed to counteract the bureaucratic device of hiding embarrassing docu-

ments in investigatory files solely to keep them secret.

The conferees agreed to a Kennedy motion to delay final action one week so Mr. Ford can present his views, but several members saw the White House request as a Justice Department maneuver to re-open issues the conference has already settled.

"This is disgraceful," said Rep. John Moss (D-Calif.), a leading sponsor of the House bill. "We should settle this right now. I have absolutely no fear of a veto. I am not impressed by a threat from the deputy attorney general."

A Kennedy aide noted that the Justice Department wasn't represented at the drafting sessions of the conference last week. "Now they're using the excuse of the change of power

at the White House to open it up all over again," he said.

Kennedy said the conferees should give Mr. Ford the courtesy of a week to review the bill, but he indicated he would oppose any move to dilute the provisions already approved by the conference.

Rep. John N. Erlenborn (R-Ill.) urged accommodation with the White House, noting that "several agencies recommended a veto."

Others attending the session described the situation as a bluffing contest, in which the Justice Department knows that the sponsors want a bill badly enough to compromise if they must, but the congressmen know that President Ford, who has pledged an open administration, would find it difficult to justify a veto of a freedom of information bill.

The agreement to delay a week also reflected the renewed White House influence on Capitol Hill and the re-emergence of Republican loyalty to the White House. Participants agreed that, before last Friday, telephone calls warning of a veto would have failed to impress the conferees.