Information Bill Veto 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. Saxbe.

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 documents 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.