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Amendments: Five up, three down

By Columnist, Jim Beam

Voters apparently took the easy way out Sept. 30 by voting for all 13 proposed amendments to the state constitution. Now, we are being asked to vote on eight more Tuesday, Nov. 7.

Only two of the eight amendments look like issues that should be decided by all of the state's voters. The other six could be handled by legislative statute.

Unfortunately, subjects that are already in the constitution because of earlier amendments have to be changed by additional amendments. It's a never-ending cycle.

Voters staged a revolt in 1970 by rejecting 53 proposed amendments. And that gave impetus to writing a new and shorter constitution in 1974. It was an easy sell because the 1921 constitution had grown from 49,200 to 255,500 words because of the addition of 536 amendments.

Brevity was a big selling point in 1974 because the new constitution contained only 35,000 words. However, voters have approved 140 of 202 proposed amendments since 1974, so the new document is also mushrooming.

Of the eight proposals on the Tuesday ballot, the American Press Editorial Board supports Amendments 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7 and opposes Amendments 3, 4 and 8.

Too many assessors

Amendment 7 is the headliner, and it deserves unqualified support. The proposal would reduce the number of tax assessors in Orleans Parish from seven to one. The other 63 parishes have one assessor, and at least two of them are larger than Orleans.

I remember the days when New Orleans was treated like a separate territory within the state because it had so many more people than everyone else. It also had its own system of government, and having seven assessors is a throwback to those times.

Things have changed drastically in the Crescent City over the years, and those changes were accelerated by Hurricane Katrina. Population has declined dramatically.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco and the Legislature started an Orleans government reform movement during the last regular session by consolidating elective offices and 23 levee boards into two. Reducing the number of assessors is the last big piece of the reorganization puzzle.

The change will improve efficiency, save money and streamline operations. More equitable property assessments should also be another major plus. Those assessments are now all over the map.

No. 7 has to pass statewide and also in Orleans Parish to become effective.

Amendment 8 would create the Central Community School System within East Baton Rouge Parish. It's a bad idea, and should be defeated.

Baker and Zachary school systems have already been carved out of East Baton Rouge Parish, and this movement will only fracture the parish even more. No. 8 has to pass statewide and in East Baton Rouge Parish to take effect.

Louisiana's public education system doesn't need to be any more fractured than it already is.

Amendment 1 would freeze property tax assessments for former military members and certain people with disabilities. There is an income threshold in order to qualify for the freeze that is adjusted for annual cost-of-living changes. It's not a perfect amendment, but is worthy of support. People making more than \$58,531 in 2006 would not qualify for the tax break.

Amendment 2 would increase the amount of money parishes can get from the state severance tax from \$750,000 to \$850,000. The cap would be adjusted each year based

on the cost of living. Parishes deserve to share in increased revenues from oil and gas production.

Amendment 3 would exempt leased equipment operated by three of 34 small nonprofit rural hospitals from parish property taxes. It's a narrow interest proposal that doesn't belong in the constitution.

Amendment 4 would exempt motor vehicles from municipal property taxes. It's another of those unnecessary amendments. New Orleans is the only city levying a property tax on vehicles, and even it hasn't collected the tax in 2005 and 2006.

Amendment 5 grants a property tax exemption for artworks that are placed on sale by consigning them to a dealer. Approval will encourage artists to place more of their works on consignment, and that would create a friendlier business climate.

Amendment 6 gives the Legislature specific authority to create new family and juvenile judgeships within judicial districts. Controversy has often arisen on whether district courts have the right to create family and juvenile sections on their own, and this amendment should clear up the confusion. The Judicial Council of the Louisiana Supreme Court would still determine whether new judges are needed.

Don't pass the buck

Legislative elections are scheduled next October and November, and that would be an appropriate time to send the message that we are tired of having to decide so many constitutional amendments. Voters should get candidates on the record to promise, if elected, they will handle the routine issues on their own.

Meanwhile, consider voting next Tuesday for Amendments 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7 and against 3, 4 and 8.

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