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EDITORIAL: Assessor mess continues

Friday, April 14, 2006

Efforts to bring New Orleans government down to a reasonable size took one step forward and one step back Thursday. To its members' credit, the House Judiciary Committee unanimously approved a proposal backed by Gov. Kathleen Blanco to consolidate the city's numerous courts, sheriffs' offices and court clerks' offices.

Unfortunately, a bill that would have merged the city's seven assessors' offices into one stalled in the Senate Local and Municipal Affairs Committee. Sens. Ann Duplessis, Lydia Jackson and Tom Schedler supported Senate Bill 141. But, even despite Gov. Blanco's testimony in favor of the bill, three other senators -- including Derrick Shepherd -- put politics before common sense.

Sen. Shepherd's opposition to the bill is galling. His district includes part of New Orleans, and he was expected to vote for the measure. Instead, he and other opponents are helping to bleed a wounded city dry.

The current system squanders money that could be used to hire police or pick up trash. Arthur Sterbcow of the New Orleans Metropolitan Association of Realtors estimated at Thursday's hearing that salaries, expense accounts and benefits for the seven assessors cost taxpayers \$5.6 million over a four-year term.

Advocates of the status quo keep insisting that the uniqueness of New Orleans' seven-assessor system doesn't make it wrong. They also imply that city voters will get their say on the issue April 22, when the seven incumbents are up for re-election.

But the question of whether to consolidate the assessors' offices isn't on that ballot. Indeed, the assessors' allies in Baton Rouge have done everything they can to prevent an honest public vote. Merging the assessors' offices would take a constitutional amendment -- which itself would require the support of a majority of voters in New Orleans and statewide.

New Orleans can't afford to waste any money. Every dollar spent on unnecessary elected offices is a dollar that could go toward vital services that the city needs to stay alive.

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