



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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AMERICAN PRESS EDITORIAL

Assessors' merger boosts reform drive

Slowly but surely, long overdue reforms appear to be taking root in Louisiana. The latest example was last week's voter approval of a constitutional amendment that will consolidate the seven tax assessors offices in Orleans Parish into one office.

There was no surprise that Constitutional Amendment 7, which proposed to combine the assessors office, passed statewide by an overwhelming 78 percent to 22 percent. Obviously, voters throughout the state could not comprehend why Orleans Parish should be any different than the other 63 parishes. However, for the amendment to be approved, it also had to pass in Orleans Parish. And in the run-up to the Nov. 7 election, that was a concern in the other corners of the state.

The campaign to derail the assessors' consolidation started in the spring when a couple of state legislators who were related to two of the assessors tried to scuttle the constitutional amendment proposal.

In testimony before a committee of the Legislature, Fifth District Tax Assessor Tom Arnold asked, "Where else can you walk into a 108-year-old courthouse and have a cup of coffee or Coke with your assessor?" Consolidation proponents seized on those words, suggesting that Arnold's coziness comment hinted at a system that promoted favoritism in property assessment.

A 2003 survey by the Times-Picayune newspaper found that property assessments varied widely from district to district and that a typical home in the parish sold for 70 percent more than its valuation.

Once the Legislature approved the amendment for the November ballot, the seven assessors began their attempt to retain their offices by telling Orleans Parish residents that consolidation would result in a hefty increase in their property taxes.

That argument, though, was countered by many state and local officials and the Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, a grass-roots committee that formed initially to advocate the consolidation of the 23 levee boards in southeast Louisiana.

The good-government proponents won when parish voters approved the assessors consolidation amendment by a 67 percent to 33 percent margin.

"We only need one," New Orleans resident Rob Worley told the Times-Picayune. "As I understand it, they're (assessors) paid \$90,000 a year, and to have seven of them is ridiculous. We don't need them. I'm utterly sick and tired of the way we've done business in this city, and I was glad to vote for this."

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans founder Ruthie Friesen said, "This is the power of the people over the politics of the past. We're coming together ... to see people coming together across racial divides, across economic lines means everything.

"The nation has been looking for a clear message that we're willing to take responsibility for our recovery. With levee reform and now this, I think we're sending a clear message."

Louisiana residents should be emboldened by the results to press on with reforms in state, parish and local government agencies. And politicians who cling to the status quo should feel uneasy.