



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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EDITORIAL: Change has come

Thursday, November 09, 2006

New Orleans is a city steeped in history and tradition, and the past is a part of its strength.

But the 150-year practice of dividing Orleans Parish into seven districts with seven tax assessors robbed the city of resources and punished new homeowners with dramatically higher tax bills than their neighbors.

Some current assessors desperate to hold onto the status quo tried to paint the fractured system as the last remnant of personal service in government.

Voters didn't buy it and, at long last, the seven-assessor system is on its way out.

Despite attempts by some assessors to make voters fear change, constitutional Amendment 7 passed overwhelmingly statewide and in New Orleans Tuesday. This day has been a long time coming. The Bureau of Governmental Research and other good government groups and this newspaper's editorial page have pushed for a single assessor for years -- decades, in fact.

The assessors held on, though, through a combination of personal power and inertia. And before Katrina, it was easier for residents to put up with an outmoded system. As with everything, for good and for ill, the storm changed that.

Since Katrina, a fed-up citizenry has mobilized for change. Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, which formed last fall around the issue of levee board reform, redirected its focus to assessor reform after levee consolidation passed. They found allies in Baton Rouge. Rep. Austin Badon and Sen. Anne Duplessis championed the assessor reform legislation and were able to get it passed with help from Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

There was some fear that the aggressive and misleading anti-change campaign by long-time assessors might quash the post-Katrina reform movement. It didn't. More than two thirds of New Orleans voters -- 68 percent -- cast ballots for the amendment Tuesday. Even the assessors couldn't mistake the message.

Reformers have to wait four more years for the change to take effect. During that time, the assessors ought to begin to bring rationality to property valuations. The Louisiana Tax Commission ordered a reappraisal of all property in New Orleans, which is due next year, and the commission needs to make sure it is done properly.

Then, in 2010, when New Orleans will get rid of six assessors and choose a single assessor for the city, we all need to make sure that person is highly qualified, honorable and fair.

After that, the office should run so well that the assessor is practically invisible.

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