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House approves assessors merger; Voters would decide issue in November

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By Ed Anderson, Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- With Gov. Kathleen Blanco looking on, the House gave 98-2 approval Tuesday to a proposed change in the state Constitution that would reduce the number of assessors in Orleans Parish from seven to one, a major element of the governor's legislative package to streamline New Orleans government.

The vote leaves the measure just one step short of final passage.

The House also stripped a potentially unfriendly provision from Senate Bill 141 by Sen. Ann Duplessis, D-New Orleans, restoring the date for a vote of the people to this fall.

Opponents had tried to head off momentum for the one-assessor measure by amending the bill in committee to delay the election to the fall of 2008.

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, who represents a few precincts of Carrollton, asked the House to reinstate the Nov. 7 election date, when runoffs for two statewide offices and the primary for congressional races will be held. The House went along with Scalise's request, 64-35.

The only two New Orleans area legislators who cast "no" votes on final passage were Reps. Arthur Morrell, D-New Orleans, and Ken Odinet, D-Arabi. Reps. Alex Heaton, D-New Orleans, the brother of New Orleans 7th District Assessor Henry Heaton, and Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers, son of Algiers Assessor Tom Arnold, argued against the measure but both were recorded as absent on the final vote.

Duplessis said she will ask the Senate to go along with the House changes to her bill today. Blanco's other bill to downsize the size of New Orleans' government, by merging the state district courts, their clerks and sheriffs starting in 2009, passed Monday and needs just a final vote by the Senate on House-made changes.

'Very difficult vote'

Rep. Austin Badon, D-New Orleans, who handled Duplessis' bill on the House floor, urged colleagues to approve the measure and send the issue to the voters of the state and New Orleans. As a constitutional amendment, the Legislature must pass it by a two-thirds vote and the voters of the state and New Orleans must approve by a simple majority. If the measure passes statewide but fails in New Orleans, it is dead.

"I know it is a very difficult vote," Badon said, referring to loyalties some lawmakers have to Heaton and Arnold. "Help us to do this. It is important fiscally; it is something that is long overdue. . . . Simply allow the people to have a voice in this."

Blanco was joined in the chamber by Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, an unsuccessful candidate for New Orleans mayor who also backed the consolidation.

Even before the final vote was taken, Arnold thanked the House for the time it had taken to debate the bill and conceded defeat. "We fought the good fight," he said. "We see where it is going. We lost, but I thank y'all for letting us play."

Referring to comments Blanco made in a news conference almost two weeks ago in which she said she might have to do some arm-twisting to pass the bill -- including using projects in the state's construction and operating budgets to pass it -- Arnold said the cost of the merger may be pet projects in the two money bills.

Blanco has denied she traded projects in the budget bills for support of the assessors merger.

Badon said the city will save between \$676,000 and \$698,000 a year by abolishing the assessors. "You are not going to have seven CEOs doing the job of one," he said.

Election delay was sought

Heaton argued for the 2008 election date to give people displaced from New Orleans more time to get back to repopulate the city and vote. "They are not going to come back for an assessors" referendum this fall, he said.

Heaton also pointed out that six of the seven assessors on the ballot in April and May citywide elections won re-election. "The people have already spoken," he said.

But Scalise said voters have never been given the choice to keep seven assessors or have just one like the other 63 parishes.

"What's wrong with allowing more people to vote?" Arnold asked.

Morrell asked the House to reject the bill. He said the bill will not save money and will cost New Orleans more in the long run because single-assessor parishes -- like Jefferson and East Baton Rouge -- have to hire dozens of staffers to help the elected assessor.

"This is one of those bills that looks good and sounds good," Morrell said. "We are saving money right now" with the seven assessors and their small staffs.

Rep. Karen Carter, D-New Orleans, the daughter of former Assessor Ken Carter, asked the House to approve the measure. She said the measure will give the people of New Orleans a chance to express themselves on the issue once and for all. "If we don't do this, we will revisit this year after year after year," Carter said.

The House also approved 99-2 Duplessis' Senate Bill 647 that makes changes in state law to reflect the consolidation of the assessors offices. If the constitutional amendment does not win approval, the bill becomes moot.

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