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La. voters asked to decipher 13 proposed constitutional changes

By DOUG SIMPSON
The Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) Louisiana voters will be asked to decide whether to support a long list of proposed changes to the state constitution when they go to the polls Sept. 30.

The 13 topics range from levee boards to the homestead exemption, from judges' qualifications to how state government should spend federal dollars. Important issues all, but some observers say most of the ballot proposals are written in opaque language that could confuse voters who don't study them before hitting the polls.

"We're strongly urging that people do their homework in advance, because if they get in the booth and try to figure these out, it's going to be an extremely difficult task," said Jim Brandt, head of the nonprofit Public Affairs Research Council, whose staff studied the amendments and distributes an explanatory guide.

As an example, Brandt points to amendment No. 3 a proposal to reorganize southeast Louisiana's levee board system. The idea is a political hot potato, driven by concerns over levee management in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Measure No 3. focuses solely on levees, but voters might have trouble figuring that out it was written so the term "levee" does not appear on the ballot.

The amendment's sponsor, state Sen. Walter Boasso, R-Arabi, said he has made public appearances in "all four corners of Louisiana" to raise awareness about the proposal a reorganization Boasso believes could help prevent future levee failures of the sort that occurred after Hurricane Katrina.

The levee boards in and around New Orleans have long been regarded as dens of political patronage, and were widely blamed for failing to inspect the levees that failed and inundated the city with floodwater last year.

Congress made it clear that doing away with the fractured system of levee boards was necessary if Louisiana were to continue receiving billions in federal hurricane relief.

Boasso fought in two special legislative sessions to convince colleagues that they must dissolve those boards and create new, regional oversight boards, staffed by experts in flood control, to protect the region. Boasso, with the eventual backing of Gov. Kathleen Blanco, managed to push the constitutional amendment through the Legislature in February, a measure that would create two boards to oversee flood protection projects: one for the east bank of the Mississippi River, another for the west bank.

Boasso said he's confident that the measure will get support from all parts of the state.

Blanco also has spoken around the state in favor of Boasso's amendment, plus the first, second and fourth proposed constitutional changes. All four, Blanco said, would help the state restore its eroding coastline and ratchet up protection against hurricanes.

Campaigning for "Yes" votes on all four, Blanco she was concerned that voters would cast "No" ballots across the board, as a form of protest.

"Oftentimes, people just vote 'No' on all constitutional amendments, to say that they're too confusing," Blanco said.

Another proposal that sparked lengthy debate among lawmakers is amendment No. 5, which would prohibit governments from expanding their power to take private land to spur economic development. Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth is the amendment's sponsor.

The topic sparked lawmakers' interest after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling last year that allowed a Connecticut town to seize and transfer private land to a developer that wanted to build a hotel, office space and upscale housing. However, the high court said states could ban the practice.

Opponents of McPherson's measure argue it would limit Louisiana's competitiveness with other states for developments that need land for retail operations, hotels and other businesses.

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Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans:

PAR's guide to the amendments is available at the group's web site, <http://www.la-par.org/>.

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