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New assessor system to take effect in 2010

One-assessor amendment wins big statewide and in New Orleans

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By Gordon Russell, Staff writer

In a landmark vote that will radically remake one of the oldest and most entrenched institutions in local politics, New Orleanians overwhelmingly approved an amendment to the state Constitution to reduce the number of assessors in the city from seven to one.

The dismantling of the system, which dates to the mid-1800s, is the latest and most visible in a string of post-Katrina efforts aimed at overhauling the city's antiquated political machinery.

For ratification, the measure had to be approved in New Orleans and statewide. It cleared both hurdles easily, with 78 percent of voters statewide and 68 percent of New Orleans voters approving the measure.

Turnout in Tuesday's election ran about as predicted, with about 31 percent of Louisiana's 2.8 million registered voters casting ballots statewide. In New Orleans, about 24 percent of the city's 297,173 registered voters went to the polls.

The approval of Amendment 7 came after decades of preaching by good-government groups, which have said the city's unique, balkanized system of property appraisal is unfair and wasteful. Though consolidating the city's assessors into a single office had been debated for years, Tuesday's vote marked the first opportunity for Orleans Parish residents to cast ballots on the matter.

Proponents of the change, led by Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, a grass-roots group that sprung up after Katrina to advocate levee board mergers, were ebullient in victory.

"This is the power of the people over the politics of the past," said Ruthie Frierson, the group's founder. "We're coming together. . . . When we look at the vote tonight, to see people coming together -- across racial divides, across economic lines -- means everything."

Frierson added that the vote should be noted by members of Congress, too, some of whom have been critical of New Orleans and its reputation for corruption.

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

Mayor Ray Nagin said he believes the change will result in savings to taxpayers as well as fairer assessments.

"It's a tremendous positive sign for the city," said Nagin, who shined a light on assessments by allowing an aide to post the tax rolls online in 2003. "It's something we should have done a long time ago."

The incumbent assessors and their supporters, who portrayed themselves as representatives of the little guy in a fight with the city's business elite, were reflective in defeat.

Third District Assessor Erroll Williams, a leading opponent of the amendment, called the vote "the will of the people" and said he and his colleagues would continue efforts to modernize the tax rolls as they serve out their terms.

The assessors will remain in office until 2010, when New Orleans voters will elect a single assessor for the entire city. Williams said it's possible he'll run for the position.

"I sort of expected it," Williams said of Tuesday's result. "In a campaign, if you can't match your opponent's message dollar for dollar, that happens. We might have been outspent four to one. But the people who voted heard both sides of the issue, and they voted for what they think is best for the future of the city."

Disaster changes attitudes

After Hurricane Katrina, efforts to transform the most hidebound elements of the region's political structure, long discussed in studies and on editorial pages, gained unprecedented steam.

On Sept. 30, voters across the state approved a measure to consolidate the area's Byzantine network of levee boards charged with protecting southeast Louisiana from floods. The Legislature, meanwhile, passed laws merging duplicative offices in New Orleans long viewed as political fiefdoms: dual sheriff's offices and clerks of court, for instance.

The seven assessors' offices were both the most obvious target for shrinkage and the most difficult mountain for reformers to scale.

No other parish in Louisiana, including those with larger populations and more taxable property, has more than one assessor. Indianapolis may be the only other city in the nation with multiple assessors, and it, too, is attempting to consolidate them.

Moreover, the system is costly: Each assessor makes an annual salary of about \$90,000. When a generous benefits package is added, the per-assessor cost to taxpayers is about \$140,000.

But the costs have not translated into a smoothly functioning system.

Predictably, the seven assessors go about their jobs in different ways, and property valuations are haphazard. Property that has changed hands recently is far more apt to be appraised at or near its true value, while homes that go unsold for decades tend to be dramatically undervalued.

A survey by The Times-Picayune found that in 2003, a typical home sold for 70 percent more than its valuation. A follow-up study by the state Tax Commission, which oversees the assessors, produced similar results, and the agency ordered a reappraisal, due next year, of all residential property in New Orleans.

The system isn't without its charms. To some students of politics and admirers of tradition, the seven district assessors are a quaint throwback to a more civilized era of American democracy, a time when voters knew their representatives.

Fifth District Assessor Tom Arnold, who represents Algiers, sought to evoke such Rockwellian imagery in the spring when he urged the Legislature not to put the merger on the ballot.

"Where else can you walk into a 108-year-old courthouse and have a cup of coffee or Coke and visit with your assessor?" he asked rhetorically.

It was a view shared by many of Arnold's constituents.

But Arnold's "cup of coffee" remark became a call to action for proponents of consolidation. Fraternizing between assessors and their constituents, they said, is the problem with the system. Property values should be based on science, not relationships, they said.

'We only need one'

Not long after the Legislature killed the merger bill, a slate of seven candidates calling themselves the "IQ Ticket" materialized to oppose the seven incumbents.

The candidates vowed to refuse their salaries and instead spend the money on qualified and apolitical staffers. They also promised to work tirelessly for the merger of the seven offices, hence the name: "IQ" for "I Quit."

Yet just one of the seven "IQ" candidates won -- lawyer Nancy Marshall, who defeated incumbent Al Coman in the 6th District. But the close nature of some of the races suggested that voters were having second thoughts about the seven-assessor system. Assessors had typically cruised to re-election; this time, one lost, and two were forced into runoffs.

In the subsequent legislative session, the groups that had focused their attention on levee board consolidation turned to merging the assessors' offices. They were joined by powerful allies, among them Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who supported bills sponsored by state Sen. Ann Duplessis and Rep. Austin Badon Jr., both Democrats from New Orleans.

Though the assessors put up a spirited fight, lawmakers eventually voted to put the measure on the ballot. Proponents of the measure said they raised \$400,000 to promote it, and the message appeared to have found its mark with many city voters.

"We only need one," said Uptown resident Rob Worley, explaining his vote Tuesday. "As I understand it, they're 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."

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