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Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: One city, one assessor

Date: Jun 5, 2006

Editorial

Of all people, members of the House Ways and Means Committee ought to understand the need to cut costs after Hurricane Katrina and make New Orleans government more efficient.

In the last legislative session, though, a majority of the committee voted down proposals to merge the offices of the city's seven elected tax assessors into one. In effect, the panel protected the interests of tinpot politicians -- and denied the public the right to vote on the issue.

Voters deserve to have their say. If Ways and Means members care about New Orleans' current plight, they will pass House Bill 642 today.

Introduced by Rep. Austin Badon, the bill proposes a constitutional amendment that would consolidate the seven assessors' offices and bring Orleans Parish in line with every other parish in the state. That amendment will only take effect if approved by voters in New Orleans and statewide.

The bill is sure to meet stiff resistance. Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who supports the proposed merger, should do everything in her power to push Rep. Badon's legislation through the committee today.

Even when the city's population was at its peak in the 1960s, New Orleans didn't need seven assessors. The system, which discourages consistent assessments across the city and encourages political games, makes even less sense now that city government is scraping for money for essential services.

Two committee members shouldn't even be voting on Rep. Badon's bill because they have major conflicts of interest. Rep. Jeff Arnold is the son of one sitting assessor, and Rep. Alex Heaton is the brother of another. Unfortunately, Rep. Arnold and Rep. Heaton have shown no inclination to recuse themselves. Instead, they have voted for a wasteful status quo on multiple occasions.

And while Rep. Arnold and his father have argued that voters like having seven assessors, supporters of that system have thwarted all efforts to bring the question to a public vote.

Residents and businesses may not base their decisions on whether to invest in New Orleans upon the number of tax assessors that the city has. But people are desperate for signs that elected leaders will focus all available resources on reviving New Orleans. The Ways and Means Committee has a chance to show that the needs of a stricken city will come before the wants of a small number of elected politicians.

This time, committee members shouldn't blow that chance.

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