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### Reformers keep nervous eye on IQ ticket

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Stephanie Grace

Fresh off her organization's successful crusade for levee board consolidation, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans chairwoman Ruthie Frierson is back at it this legislative session, pushing lawmakers to consolidate New Orleans's seven assessor offices.

Yet when asked her opinion on the IQ (shorthand for "I Quit") ticket, the Gang of Seven reform-minded challengers hoping to unseat the incumbents, Frierson said she has no official opinion.

In fact, Frierson is quite adamant about her neutrality in next Saturday's elections, despite her goals of consolidating duplicative offices and reforming archaic practices that have led to wildly uneven tax bills -- which just happens to mirror the IQ team's goals.

Jay Lapeyre's organization, the Business Council of New Orleans, is working alongside Frierson's group to lobby the Legislature for a constitutional amendment merging the offices, and the business council also has no position on the IQ ticket.

Their reasons, at least in part, stem from their groups' very identities. Frierson heads a grass-roots organization that does not endorse candidates for office. And as a nonprofit, the Business Council also steers clear of official involvement in political races.

But they're also mindful that they're navigating a complicated political landscape right now, and frankly, it makes them a little nervous.

With the Legislature taking up the issue at exactly the same time the assessors are seeking reelection, there's bound to be confusion. Around town, signs of it are in the signs themselves.

Assessor re-election placards dot some lawns (and raise the question of how much of a break the advertised candidates gave the homeowners in question). Others hold signs with a big blue "IQ," along with the name of ticket's candidate in that particular district. There are also signs that boost the unaffiliated election challengers, some who advertise their own preference for one assessor or promise to conduct "fair" assessments.

Mixed in with all those are the old Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans signs, updated to refer to the legislative assessor fight.

What worries some of the reform groups is what would happen if the IQ candidates, who are largely unknown and up against some well-established names, don't fare all that well.

"We're concerned that if it fails, they would use it as a proxy," Lapeyre said.

The "they," of course, are the likes of state Reps. Jeff Arnold and Alex Heaton, both close relatives of incumbent assessors and both members of the House Ways and Means committee, which killed a merger proposal during the recent special session. Lapeyre, Frierson and their allies predict that the pair and other defenders of the current system would paint IQ victories in just a couple of districts, or worse, none at all, as a citywide referendum on consolidation. They refer to the IQ effort as a symptom of frustration with the status quo, not the cure.

For their part, the IQ folks don't seem too worried. They say even a partial victory would save money and give them "inside position" from which to push for transparency and consistency and push for a full merger. Shaun Rafferty, a lawyer running the ticket's joint campaign, said that if things go well enough, the citywide tally for all IQ candidates might even send a message that a constitutional amendment eliminating the offices would pass in New Orleans. That's important because the measure must pass statewide and in the city itself.

Which is not to say there's tension between the two camps. On the contrary.

Lapeyre was an early patron of the IQ movement, and has donated to all seven of its candidates. He said other members of the Business Council, an organization that includes many of New Orleans' major corporate players, have contributed too.

Nancy Marshall, the 6th District's IQ candidate, approached state Sen. Ann Duplessis, whose consolidation amendment is expected to be heard in committee today, after a

community meeting to thank her for her efforts.

"I don't want to be an assessor," Marshall, a partner with the Deutsch, Kerrigan & Stiles law firm, told Duplessis. "I want you to fix it."

So OK, maybe everyone rallying around the cause of assessor reform isn't exactly on the same page. But it would be a mistake to assume that they're not reading from the same chapter -- and hoping for the same ending.

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