



# Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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### The day the voters said 'enough'

Sunday, November 12, 2006

Stephanie Grace

Consider it official: Voters in post-K New Orleans finally seem to have had enough.

They've had it with ostensibly clairvoyant politicians who claim to know their constituents' minds. They've had enough of legislators who insist that voters not only approve of bloated, inefficient government, but don't mind that they're being ripped off paying for it. They're fed up with politicians who use scare tactics to keep their jobs.

And, based on their resounding approval of Constitutional Amendment No. 7 on Tuesday, they fully recognize that property assessments should be based on objective data, not politics, personal relationships and outright favoritism.

If Republicans across the country endured a "thumpin' " at the hands of Democrats, as President Bush put it, then New Orleans' long-serving assessors also took a collective body blow from the people they represent.

The amendment to merge the city's seven independent assessor offices into one passed by a resounding 68-32 percent in Orleans Parish, where consolidation proponents worried that anxious voters might reject the unknown and deal a death blow to an incipient but vibrant grassroots reform drive. The victory followed an equally hard-fought battle to consolidate the region's levee boards, which 94 percent of New Orleans voters approved, once they finally got to speak. But the assessor results were all the more satisfying because underassessed voters knew that some of them might end up pay higher taxes under the new system.

Not that the assessors didn't try to remind them of the good old days. "Informational" ads paid for with public funds sponsored by five incumbents, two of whom later distanced themselves from the tactic, warned that a yes vote would "create one powerful elected assessor," "take away each community's right" to choose its own assessor, and "won't save money."

Another ad, financed by political money, featured 3rd District Assessor Erroll Williams claiming the proposition was a plot by "millionaires" and corporate bigwigs who don't have average homeowners' interests at heart.

Yet in Williams' sprawling district which includes Gentilly and Eastern New Orleans, the amendment passed 60-40, according to an analysis by Greg Rigamer, chief executive of GCR & Associates, a New Orleans technology firm that tracks electoral statistics. And that's as good as it got for the assessors.

In the 5th District, Tom Arnold has claimed his constituents love to drop by the Algiers courthouse for a cup of coffee and a chat about their property tax bills. But Tuesday 61 percent of them said they're willing to forego that pleasure. In Lakeview and Carrollton, 70 percent of Henry Heaton's 7th District constituents voted yes, as did 72 percent of Garden District and Uptown voters in Betty Jefferson's 4th District. In the CBD-based 1st District represented by Darren Mire, 75 percent supported the amendment, and in Claude Mauberret's nearby 2nd District, which covers Lakeview, the French Quarter and Mid-City, 77 percent said yes.

In Uptown's 6th District, the only one to have already tipped its hand by electing a member of the consolidation-minded "I Quit" slate last spring, support ran to 83 percent.

The bottom line? While assessors and their allies have been telling everyone just how beloved they are, voters proved more than willing to throw them out.

They may have been willing all along, but how would we have known?

It took a Herculean effort by citizen groups and a handful of honorable politicians to even get the question onto the ballot, over the objection of assessor allies in Baton Rouge -- including, in a few notorious cases, their blood relatives. When reform reared its head, they -- like the assessors themselves -- lashed out at the attack on a supposedly treasured institution.

At long last, it's now clear to all that they protested too much. With the levee boards merged and multiple assessors on their way to consolidation, supporters, led by Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, the Business Council and many others, are already seeking their next project in a target rich environment.

And the next time politicians try to defend the status quo by invoking their constituents' affection for it, we should all remember that there really is a good chance they're speaking only for themselves.

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