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### **EDITORIAL: Vote for Amendment 7**

Monday, October 30, 2006

There is no sensible reason for Orleans Parish to have seven property tax assessors.

Jefferson Parish, which is larger, has one assessor. St. Tammany Parish, which is one of the fastest-growing parishes in Louisiana, has one assessor.

In fact, every other parish in the state has one property tax assessor. New Orleans' fractured system is a throwback to the 19th century, when the city absorbed Carrollton and other outlying towns without streamlining government.

The modern city should not be saddled with outmoded political structures from the 1800s. The fragmented system is costly, inefficient and inequitable. Now more than ever, post-Katrina New Orleans needs to streamline government and maximize its resources.

Constitutional Amendment 7 is crucial to that effort. The amendment would do away with the seven-assessor system in New Orleans and consolidate the duties into one position.

The change is long overdue. Some Orleans Parish assessor offices have been turned into family fiefdoms, with one generation essentially turning the office over to the next. These assessors want voters to believe that the current system works to the advantage of New Orleanians, but the assessors are the ones who benefit.

The total spent on the assessors -- including salaries, expense funds, vehicles, travel, phones, gas and other perks -- has run about \$1 million in most years, according to research by this newspaper. Roughly \$850,000 of that amount could be saved by getting rid of six of the assessors.

Some assessors argue that the money now spent on their salaries and benefits would have to be used to hire more staff, and that may be true. But \$850,000 could pay the salaries of a cadre of qualified property appraisers, which would be a much smarter use of the public's money.

Assessors opposed to the change simply don't want to give up their power. They talk about the personal relationship a property owner is able to have with an assessor in New Orleans, but that is not a credible defense of the system.

An assessor should be many things: fair, efficient, professional, honest, open, knowledgeable about real estate values. But whether or not you know your assessor well enough to have a cup of coffee should not be a factor in how your property value is calculated. The tax assessment system should run so seamlessly and fairly that you don't even have to remember the assessor's name.

Assessments are supposed to be based on facts: the size and condition of a building, comparable selling prices of similar property, the cost to replace a structure and other statistical factors.

State law sets up multiple ways for citizens to challenge an assessment they disagree with, and property owners in every parish can go to their assessor's office to do so. Ultimately, if they still are not happy, they can appeal to the Louisiana Tax Commission.

Those safeguards apply to New Orleanians just as they do to property owners in the other 63 parishes in Louisiana.

Despite what defenders of the status quo say, the current system in New Orleans breeds unfairness. Neighbors pay drastically different tax bills on almost identical houses. Instead of gradually increasing property assessments to reflect the market, many buildings are assessed at or near their sales price -- even if the sale occurred 20 years ago. In general, the more recent the purchase, the higher the tax assessment.

So, a modest Uptown cottage bought 15 years ago is assessed at \$85,000, and the modest cottage across the street bought last summer is assessed at \$300,000. The homeowner with the higher bill doesn't get better service from the city but is paying a greater share of the cost of police protection, street repairs, public education and other services.

That is simply not fair.

The uneven assessments also result in falsely inflated tax millages. New Orleans' millage rate is higher than it should be because the tax base is so undervalued. If property assessments are evened out over time, the tax rate should go down.

Getting rid of six assessors won't automatically fix these imbalances, of course, but having a single assessor with a top-notch staff would make it more likely to occur.

Some assessors want New Orleanians to fear Amendment 7, but in truth, they are the ones who are afraid. They're afraid that voters are going to banish them the way they banished the old levee boards.

For the good of homeowners, for the good of neighborhoods, for the good of the city as it rebuilds, that is what needs to happen. Vote for Amendment 7.

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