

AMERICAN PRESS

The case against amendments 1, 2

October 5, 2007

Voters in the Oct. 20 election will be confronted with four proposed amendments to the Louisiana Constitution.

The first two amendments deal with supplemental pay that the state gives to law enforcement officers and firefighters.

Amendment 1 would protect all current and future supplemental pay levels for all full-time local law enforcement officers and firefighters.

State-funded supplemental pay for local police officers was first approved by the state Legislature in 1956. Supplemental pay was expanded over the years to include local firefighters, constables, marshals and deputy sheriffs.

Prior to 2002, the pay supplement was often threatened by health of the state budget. In lean times, the Legislature sometimes did not fully fund it. Other years, it was threatened with elimination unless sales taxes were renewed.

State lawmakers drafted and voters approved a constitutional amendment in 2002 that protects a minimum payment of \$300 per month to each eligible law enforcement and firefighter employee. The amendment, however, could be overridden by a two-thirds vote of both chambers of the Legislature and the signature of the governor.

Amendment 1 would prohibit the reduction of supplemental pay, regardless of the amount and would require the Legislature to fully fund it.

During the 2007 legislative regular session, lawmakers improved an increase of supplemental pay to \$425 a month.

We believe state supplemental pay is critical in attracting and keeping qualified law enforcement officials and firefighters who serve and protect state residents.

However, we are opposed to any attempt that further restricts flexibility in the state's budget. Because of previous constitutional amendments, in times of a budget crunch, the state Department of Health and Hospitals and higher education are the only areas that can be cut.

That applies too much of the budget pain to these two areas.

For that reason, we recommend a no vote on Amendment 1.

Amendment 2 would expand supplement pay to full-time, commissioned state law enforcement officers and firefighters who are employed by a port authority and patrol waterways and riverfront areas. Companion legislation passed by the Legislature this year grants supplemental pay to those same officers whose employing agency is headquartered in a municipality with a population over 450,000 according to the latest full federal census.

If approved by voters, the amendment and companion legislation would extend

supplemental pay to only those state law enforcement officers of the Port of New Orleans Harbor Police Department and firefighters of the Port of New Orleans.

We recommend a no vote on Amendment 2 for two reasons.

First, most ports in the state have revenue streams that far exceed those of local law enforcement or firefighting districts. The ports should be able to pay their law enforcement officers and firefighters a competitive wage without the help of the state.

Second, this amendment and companion legislation, according to the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, would benefit a total of 55 employees of the Port of New Orleans.

It's ridiculous to amend the state Constitution to benefit such a narrow group.

Sunday, we will look at proposed Amendments 3 and 4.