



7 proposed amendments on ballot

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Voters are being asked to decide seven proposed changes to the state Constitution, including whether to increase parishes' share of oil and gas taxes, lift restrictions on government expropriations and impose terms limits for the Public Service Commission and a spate of other boards.

Oil- and gas-producing parishes would get a bigger chunk of energy revenue split with the state under Proposed Amendment 4 on Tuesday's ballot. If approved, it would raise the annual local share cap from \$850,000 to \$1.85 million in 2009 and \$2.85 million in 2010, a level that could go up in later years, depending on inflation.

That's important in areas such as Webster Parish, where heavy equipment going in and out of north Louisiana oil fields hammer rural roads. The proposal calls for dedicating at least half the additional revenue to transportation — bridge, road, drainage — projects.

"We're not a real wealthy parish and any program that would help our roads would be welcome," said Ronda Carnahan, secretary-treasurer of the parish police jury.

Estimates say the proposal would by 2010 have a \$56 million hit on the state general fund, a figure that caused the nonpartisan Council for a Better Louisiana, or CABL, to issue nuanced support. The state relies heavily on oil and gas revenue and, while it's argued successfully for its own share of more offshore royalties, could see its overall revenue hit by wildly fluctuating energy prices.

"Our view: there's some merit to this type of activity," greater state-parish revenue sharing, CABL President Barry Erwin said. But, "you have to draw the line somewhere, and this may be it."

Proposed Amendment 6 seeks to tweak language voters approved in 2006 imposing limits on government taking of private property. Currently, governmental entities can expropriate properties that are derelict or for a public purpose, such as making way for a road or park. However, when properties deemed health or safety threats are expropriated, entities like the New

Orleans Redevelopment Authority, who pay court fees and fair market value for properties expropriated, will generally have to offer the original owner first dibs on buying the property back, according to analyses by CABL and the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana.

The proposal would delete right of first refusal in cases of properties taken to eliminate health or safety risks and when government takes more property than it needs for projects, the analyses show.

Erwin, whose group supports all the proposals, said current law could hamper redevelopment in areas still recovering from the 2005 hurricanes; officials may be leery of reselling property to an owner who let his place fall into disrepair once before, he said.

But David Marcello, executive director of the Public Law Center, a cooperative endeavor of Loyola and Tulane universities, said the effect of the proposal "would be to leave property owners in a worst position than they found themselves" in 2006.

"I think the best way to deal with deteriorated housing is to put homeowners on notice and give them an opportunity to remediate," he said.

Amendment 1 would limit people to serving three consecutive terms on 10 boards and commissions, including the PSC, state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the state Board of Regents.

The other proposed constitutional amendments are:

_ Amendment 2, which would change from at least five days to at least seven the advance notice for calling a special legislative session.

_ Amendment 3, which would allow for a temporary appointment to a legislative seat vacated for more than 180 days by a member on active military leave.

_ Amendment 5, which lets the "special assessment," generally available for elderly and some disabled residents under the Homestead Exemption, retain the assessment level they had on property expropriated by or sold to a government entity if they buy a new house.

_ Amendment 7, which would allow public money reserved for non-pension retirement benefits to be invested in stocks.

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