



Everything New Orleans

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### Motives for electing tax panel seem clear

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Say you've got a system that has quite obviously been tainted, if not corrupted, by politics. Say you're looking to pass legislation to reform the system, and the proposal is to -- get this -- add another level of politics.

That's a neat little synopsis of what happened last week in Baton Rouge, when the House Ways and Means Committee voted unanimously to replace the gubernatorially appointed Louisiana Tax Commission, which is charged with making sure the state's assessors do their jobs properly, with popularly elected commissioners.

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The commission, once relatively obscure, has drawn attention of late for forcing elected assessors to fix the wildly uneven valuations in many parishes. The assessors often give longtime homeowners, political insiders and campaign contributors an unfair advantage over newcomers and regular Joes. All the commission is asking the assessors to do is comply with the state law that requires properties to be appraised at something approximating fair market value.

Supporters of House Bill 790 would surely say that politics is just an ugly word for democracy. In fact, its author, state Rep. Peppi Bruneau, basically did.

"This is an appointed body, a nameless, faceless group serving at the whim and caprice of another person. We have an appointed body that is not responsible to the people," he told the

committee.

Here's the problem: It's just that responsibility to the people that has led to trouble in the first place.

Now, I like democracy (and dislike high taxes) as much as the next person, but the way it works now, assessors have little incentive to value homes accurately because they're not the ones who have to come up with the money to pay for police and schools.

And you've got to wonder, why this, and why now, when a professional and highly regarded commission appointed by Gov. Kathleen Blanco is turning up the heat on many local assessors, and has gone so far as to order New Orleans' seven assessors to conduct a citywide reassessment?

It may be pure coincidence that the 14-0 ye a vote came out of a committee with a heavy New Orleans presence, but it certainly didn't hurt. In fact, state Rep. Alex Heaton, whose brother is 7th District assessor Henry Heaton, volunteered during the hearing to sign on as a co-sponsor. (State Rep. Jeff Arnold, son of 5th District Assessor Tom Arnold, also sits on Ways and Means but missed the hearing. He's pushing a separate bill that would prevent local governments from turning higher assessments into a windfall).

Bruneau also hails from New Orleans and is a long-time ally of the family of the 2nd District's Claude Mauberret. After Mauberret's father and predecessor in office died last year, Bruneau credited the family with "a stability of home ownership" in the district, presumably a reference to the light tax burden.

And Bruneau has been perfectly up front about his own attitude towards what he has called "ungodly" property tax increases.

It's a testament to how much politicians are hearing from voters that committee members supported the bill over the strong objections of Blanco, the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry and watchdog groups such as the Public Affairs Research Council, which, in an analysis of all the assessment-related bills filed this session, labeled Bruneau's proposal "particularly troublesome."

Sure, doing the right thing can be unpopular. Plenty of homeowners have seen their bills rise substantially under the pressure from the commission, and more will get slammed in the future. There is outrage among those who didn't feel undertaxed in the first place.

There is also every expectation that elected tax commissioners facing the same pressures would be inclined to repeat the assessors' worst offenses.

Besides, it's not that there's no opportunity for public input. Laws that the commission enforces are set by the Legislature or approved by voters as part of the state Constitution. And of course, Blanco and the senators who confirm Tax Commission members have to answer to constituents.

There's no doubt that the current system could use some legislative tinkering. But it'd be nice to see lawmakers try to fix an aspect that's actually broken.

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