

Fall ballot will be lighter on proposed amendments

Voters will decide only 4 measures

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By Ed Anderson

BATON ROUGE -- Lawmakers showed restraint in approving and sending only four proposed constitutional amendments to voters in the Oct. 20 elections. That is less than one-fifth the 21 approved by voters last year.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonpartisan, issues-oriented agency, said Monday that many of the 23 proposals introduced in this year's session were overlapping, and some never gained momentum and died in committee -- like the annual attempt to exempt a larger share of a home's value from the property tax rolls. A total of 93 amendments were filed in 2006.

Usually about 15 percent of the proposals filed in any session become part of the state's charter, Brandt said.

"All eyes were on the money," and the \$3.7 billion in unanticipated revenue lawmakers had to deal with for a myriad of state and local programs, said Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana, a private, nonprofit government research organization. "I think there was so much money on the table this year, people saw dollar signs in their eyes . . . and everything else was a distraction."

The four proposals to be voted on this fall are:

- House Bill 260 by Rep. Jack Smith, D-Patterson, to expand the property tax exemption to include consigned jewelry. Voters last year approved a measure to exclude works of art from property taxes.
- Senate Bill 2 by Sen. Heulette "Clo" Fontenot, R-Livingston, to prohibit lawmakers from reducing the state supplemental pay for police and firefighters. The pay is expected to go from \$300 to \$425 a month when Gov. Kathleen Blanco signs the state's operating budget. Brandt said its passage would mean lawmakers couldn't cut the pay during budget crises without asking voters to approve another change in the state Constitution.
- Senate Bill 128 by Sen. Francis Heitmeier, D-Algiers, to expand the supplemental pay to include firefighters and police officers employed by port authorities. It would apply to 44 police officers and 10 firefighters at the Port of New Orleans and 14 police officers at the Port of Lake Charles.
- Senate Bill 127 by Sen. Walter Boasso, D-Arabi, to require the Legislature to devise ways of financing future benefits for the state's retirement systems when it approves new benefits. The liability of any new benefits must be paid off within 10 years.

The proposals were approved by at least a two-thirds vote of the Legislature and now must be ratified by voters a majority of voters.

Since 1974 when the present state Constitution took effect, lawmakers have passed 210 proposed changes and voters have ratified 148 of them.

Several proposals killed in this session dealt with tax cuts and reinstatement of some tax exemptions, as well as one doing away with the state income tax and one changing the way the Legislature operates to meeting one week a month for 10 months.

"This will be a light load this year for the voters to figure out," Brandt said after the dizzying array of sometimes-technical changes in the document approved last year.

Erwin said the non-fiscal limit of five bills per lawmaker also influenced the decrease in filing proposed constitutional changes.

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