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Lowball taxes may yet save assessors' jobs

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You won't find many property owners in New Orleans who doubt that replacing seven tax assessors with one would reduce waste, inequity and inefficiency.

But you will find plenty who figure that is a price worth paying. They figure that good government would mean higher tax bills, so they plan to vote for perpetuating bad government in next week's election.

Their fears suggest they believe they are currently paying less than they should, and there is a good chance they are right, as numerous analyses have concluded. Lowballing is a proven way for your friendly district assessor to secure a job for life and, not infrequently, pass it on to junior.

The personal touch that endears district assessors to taxpayers would not work so well citywide.

Owners of commercial buildings are similarly fond of the status quo. They figure it makes no sense to pump money into a re-election campaign and then vote the assessor out of office. If they wanted good government, they wouldn't have made a contribution in the first place.

When taxpayers believe they have a vested interest in a corruptive system, reform loses much of its charm. The constitutional amendment to put a single assessor in charge of New Orleans might encounter more opposition in the voting booth than it has in the public debate.

That debate has been largely dominated by two organizations that regard Louisiana politics as an Augean challenge. The Public Affairs Research Council notes that it "has recommended for more than 30 years that the seven separate Orleans Parish assessors should be consolidated into a single, parish-wide office."

PAR is a Johnny-come-lately compared to the Bureau of Governmental Affairs, which has been banging that drum since the 1930s.

PAR and BGR have been rehearsing the familiar and compelling argument that Orleans does not need to pay seven assessors when every other parish in the state, and just about every city in the country, gets by with one. New Orleans assessors cost taxpayers \$6.3 million a year in addition to office expenses picked up by the city. The assessors' retirement fund also siphons off close to \$1 million a year from tax revenues.

New Orleans has easily the most expensive assessment system in the state, and easily the most unfair, inconsistent and incompetent. It is also hopelessly lop-sided, with 71,812 taxpayers in the third district, pre-Katrina, and 6,710 in the fourth.

This insanity had its roots in the 19th century. PAR says the districts follow "historical boundaries dating back to the 1870s," while BGR ventures further into the mists of time, suggesting it all started when the city was split into three municipalities in 1836. Other districts were added when the reunified city grew through annexation.

It probably didn't make much sense in Victorian times, and it certainly makes none now. The only attempt to defend the current system has come in a series of ads placed by one of the assessors, Erroll Williams, who stuck taxpayers with the tab, hoping, largely in vain it turns out, that his colleagues would raid their budgets and chip in.

Williams could use public money because, while the ads are clearly designed to whip up opposition to the consolidation amendment, and keep him in a cushy job, they do not explicitly urge a no vote. According to an attorney general's opinion issued more than 20 years ago, an ad that does not advocate a position is regarded as purely informational and can be run at public expense.

The distinction drawn in the opinion is largely imaginary. When an ad raises the specter of a bogeyman super-assessor who will raise taxes, we are paying for our own indoctrination. Obviously it should be against the law.

Williams, in a letter to the editor, defends the ads, pointing out that PAR and BGR have spent money advocating a yes vote on the amendment. But PAR and BGR are spending private money for a public purpose. Williams is doing it the other way round.

His message is clearly getting through, however, and many property owners take it for granted that taxes will rise, and the pace of reconstruction in their neighborhoods slacken, if the amendment should pass.

You can tell them that, in the long run, equitable assessments will bring tax rates down and everyone will be happy. But you can't make them believe it.

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