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The Times-Picayune

Five constitutional changes face voters in November 2006 4 amendments offer minor tax law tweaks

Saturday, June 25, 2005

By Ed Anderson
Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- Only five of the 51 proposed changes to the state Constitution will be put before voters during the congressional election on Nov. 7, 2006.

Having 10 percent of proposed constitutional amendments approved by the Legislature is "about normal" for most sessions, said Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonprofit government watchdog agency.

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Meanwhile legislative officials said that out of the 1,189 bills filed for debate in the two chambers, 485 were approved by lawmakers, including the five constitutional amendments .

Of the 860 bills filed in the House, 339 passed, said House spokeswoman Shelia McCant. In the Senate, 329 bills were filed and 146 passed, said Senate spokeswoman Brenda Hodge.

Four of the five proposed constitutional amendments are Senate measures and one originated in the House.

Four of the five deal with property tax matters, but none includes the major assessment issues proposed for this session.

"These are relatively minor changes to the property tax system, compared to those that were introduced," he said. Many of the property tax issues dealing with reassessments, including whether local governments should be able to reap a windfall of taxes after property reassessments, will be studied by lawmakers in the coming months, Brandt said.

He said "there were no real marquee issues" among the five proposed constitutional changes that received a two-thirds vote. "And the voters get a year off this year" because there are no statewide elections in which to vote on the amendments for another 16 months, he said.

Since the present state Constitution went into effect in 1974, 189 changes to it have been proposed and 127 have been adopted by voters.

The most complex of the property tax-related amendments passed by lawmakers is Senate Bill 89 by Sen. Ben Nevers, D-Bogalusa, which is a compilation of several lawmakers' proposed changes to help homeowners who are veterans, their surviving spouses or the disabled.

The measure freezes property taxes for those with an income of \$56,700 or less who are: veterans with a service-connected disability of 50 percent or more; "permanently totally disabled" as certified by a court or by a state or federal agency; members of the Louisiana National Guard or Armed Forces from the state -- or their spouses -- who are missing in action or who are held as prisoners of war or who are killed in action. Such a special assessment level now applies to homeowners 65 and older whose annual income is less than \$56,700.

The other proposed changes in the Constitution that were adopted by lawmakers are:

-- House Bill 187 by Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers prohibiting any local government from imposing a property tax on motor vehicles. The tax is authorized statewide but is only collected in Orleans Parish. The exemption will cost the city between \$4.4 million and \$5.2 million each year.

-- Senate Bill 200 by Sen. Diana Bajoie, D-New Orleans, exempting from property taxes sculptures, paintings and other "creative endeavors" consigned to an art dealer or gallery. The measure started out as a local issue to exempt New Orleans art dealers from the tax, but it now applies statewide.

-- Senate Bill 32 by Sen. Robert Adley, D-Benton, exempting from property taxes medical equipment leased for more than five years by a nonprofit organization running a rural hospital, as long as the equipment is used for health care purposes.

-- Senate Bill 187 by Sen. Reggie Dupre, D-Montegut, a measure promoted by Gov. Kathleen Blanco, directing future federal money the state may get from oil and gas exploration on the Outer Continental Shelf into a special fund for coastal reclamation and restoration efforts.

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