

## **87 constitutional changes offered**

*They range from term limits to colleges*

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BATON ROUGE -- State lawmakers have filed more than 1,900 bills for debate at the lawmaking session that starts March 29, including 87 proposed changes to the state Constitution, the highest number since 2006 when 90 were introduced.

Of the 87 filed by Friday's noon deadline, 52 were introduced by House members and 35 by senators, said House Clerk Alfred "Butch" Speer.

The measures cover a gamut of topics from abolishing the lieutenant governor's office to expanding the homestead exemption from \$75,000 to \$150,000 of a home's value; and from placing term limits on statewide elected officials to allowing voters to pass on two hot-button issues a year if lawmakers approve them by a two-thirds vote.

As the deadline to file an unlimited number of bills prior to the session neared, lawmakers scurried to beat the clock with a flurry of last-minute entries.

Including the proposed constitutional amendments, 1,905 bills were filed: 1,228 in the House and 677 in the Senate.

In some years, the number of bills filed in advance of the session has exceeded 2,000.

After the session is gaveled in, each legislator can file no more than five additional bills. The final date to file bills for the session is April 20. The session must end by 6 p.m. June 30.

The number of constitutional amendments filed in 1995 is the modern record for proposed changes in the Constitution -- 194.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a Baton Rouge-based government watchdog agency, said normally 10 percent to 15 percent of the proposed constitutional changes make it to voters for approval. If that holds true this year, that means nine to 12 will go before voters this fall.

Constitutional amendments need a two-thirds vote of the Legislature to be approved. They then must go before voters for ratification. This year, the amendments would be voted on during the Nov. 2 federal elections.

Six measures that were passed last year will also be carried over to the fall election ballots, according to Jacques Berry, a spokesman for the secretary of state. Four are set for the Nov. 2 ballot and two are on the Oct. 2 ballot.

Many of this year's crop of proposed constitutional changes deal with curtailing retirement benefits of

public employees who have been convicted of crimes related to their offices; finding additional ways to use emergency funds to meet budget shortfalls; abolishing the office of lieutenant governor and treasurer; and abolishing the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and turning its powers over to the appointed education superintendent.

One proposal, House Bill 470 by Rep. Rickey Hardy, D-Lafayette, would prohibit individuals 70 and older from running for public office. Another, Senate Bill 78 by Sen. A.G. Crowe, R-Slidell, would define a fetus as a person under state law and lock that definition into the state's charter.

Brandt said the election of Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu as mayor of New Orleans caused a spike in the number of proposed changes with several aimed at abolishing the office and turn the job over to the secretary of state. One by Sen. Dan "Blade" Morrish, R-Jennings, Senate Bill 95, would abolish the offices of lieutenant governor and treasurer and turn the two jobs over to the secretary of state.

"It is an unusually large number of proposed constitutional changes," Brandt said. Some are aimed at current problems -- "such as ways to free up money for a cash-strapped budget" and others are perennials like expanding the homestead exemption.

Some of the others that have been filed include:

Senate bill 464 by Sen. Troy Hebert, I-Jeanerette, limiting all statewide officials except the governor to serve two terms unless they win re-election by a super majority of votes. To seek a third term, the measure said, an incumbent must have received 60 percent of the vote in the previous election. The incumbent would be eligible to run for a fourth term if he or she got at least 70 percent of the vote in the third-term election. Subsequent terms would depend on higher voter turnouts in the previous elections. Failing to meet those standards, Hebert said, would force an incumbent to sit out a term. "It's called performance-based public service," Hebert said.

House Bill 996 by House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, a measure to abolish the state Board of Regents, the coordinating higher education body, and the LSU, Southern University and University of Louisiana System boards of supervisors, turning their jobs of running the four-year colleges over to a proposed Louisiana University System Board of Trustees. The existing board that oversees community and technical colleges would remain in place and oversee those schools. The measure is a recommendation from a special commission that studied higher education for several months.

House Bill 1084 by Rep. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, that would prohibit the Legislature from taking steps to "legalize or legitimize prostitution." The measure said that "prostitution is a vice and is not a victimless crime."

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