

Amendments linked to voter mistrust

They have approved 151, PAR exec notes

Tuesday, October 21, 2008

By Ed Anderson

BATON ROUGE -- The state won't rewrite its 24-year-old Constitution until strong political leadership demands a change to one or more specific areas, executives of two statewide public policy research organizations said Monday.

Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana, and Jennifer Pike, research director for the Public Affairs Research Council, told members of the Press Club of Baton Rouge that voters keep amending the state's charter because they do not trust legislators and other state officials to do what they promise.

A proposed change in the Constitution needs both a two-thirds vote of the Legislature and voter approval; a state law usually needs just a majority of the 144-member Legislature and no voter ratification.

Pike said that since the present Constitution has been in effect since 1974, 151 of 214 proposed changes have been approved, roughly 71 percent of those submitted to voters. She said 29 of the past 30 over the past four years have won voter approval.

She said that voters keep amending the document to make lawmakers and other public officials do what they say they are going to do. "There is widespread mistrust and a lack of confidence" in government and its leaders, Pike said.

Voters will be asked to approve or reject seven proposed changes to the Constitution Nov. 4, the same day they elect a president, a U.S. senator, members of Congress and a slew of local officials.

Erwin said his organization has endorsed all seven of the proposals, which range from imposing term limits on 10 boards and commissions, some elected, but mostly appointive; to allowing the transfer of special property tax assessments for certain homeowners; to authorizing post-retirement benefits of public employees to be invested in stocks.

"We have put so much detail in the Constitution we have to go back into the Constitution" to make even the slightest change, Erwin said, such as with the property tax assessment for homeowners 65 and older, a measure that has been on the ballot several times in the past few years to make adjustments to it.

Erwin said that eventually a special constitutional convention will be called to address a tax issue or another section that has become unmanageable with amendments, but would not say when that might be.

One of the reasons voters keep approving changes in the charter, Erwin said, "is we do not trust the governor, we do not trust the Legislature" to keep their word from one administration to the next. As a result, he said, "we are getting more and more details into it."

"To make it (the Constitution) simpler and shorter is not a good reason" to call a constitutional convention, Pike said. "It is not time to call for a constitutional convention until (officials) identify a clear problem" and propose a solution. "Right now, it doesn't seem to be a problem," she said.

Pike and Erwin agreed that a call for a revision to one or more portions of the Constitution would have to come from the governor or key legislative leaders.

"There should be strong, strong leadership from the governor" to head off special interests from controlling a constitutional convention, Erwin said. "It would take strong leadership, likely from the governor," Pike said.

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