

Dozen constitutional add-ons possible

Voters will say yea or nay this autumn

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BATON ROUGE -- Voters this fall will decide on 12 proposed changes to the state Constitution, including six approved in the recently adjourned legislative session and six more from 2009.

Lawmakers filed 88 constitutional changes during this year's session that started in late March and ended Monday. They passed 1,059 other bills, according to the Louisiana News Bureau, a bill-tracking and reporting service.

Of the dozen proposed constitutional changes, two from 2009 are scheduled to go before voters in the Oct. 2 election, with the remaining 10 on the general election ballot Nov. 2.

The most recently approved measures cover a range of topics, from retirement benefits to changing the process for defendants waiving jury trials.

Jim Brandt of Baton Rouge, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a private nonpartisan, issues-oriented group, said the six just passed "are very narrow in scope" and lack the broad appeal or impact of others such as reworking the way some state funds can be used to balance the budget, term limits for most statewide elected officials, and abolishing the office of lieutenant governor, all concepts that failed to get any traction at the session.

Brandt said that might have been because the Legislature was preoccupied with balancing budgets and the problems related to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Brandt said normally 10 percent to 15 percent of the proposed amendments filed each year make their way to voters, but this year's average is about 7 percent.

Brandt said from a public policy perspective, House Bill 229 by Rep. Kevin Pearson, R-Slidell, might have the greatest long-term impact. If voters approve, it will require two-thirds of the Legislature to authorize any state employee benefit that carries an actuarial cost to the taxpayer.

The others passed at the recent session and scheduled for a Nov. 2 vote include:

Senate Bill 21 by Sen. Edwin Murray, D-New Orleans, to grant a two-year extension of the homestead exemption for homeowners unable to occupy their homes as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita or other declared disasters. State law now gives them five years, and the proposal would extend that to seven. It also gives the local assessor the

option to grant a displaced homeowner up to three more years -- for a total of 10 years -
- on a case-by-case basis.

Senate Bill 42 by Murray to require a five-judge panel of a court of appeal to rehear arguments in a case dealing with a reversal or modification of a worker's compensation claim when one judge on a previous three-judge panel dissents.

House Bill 246 by Rep. Rogers Pope, R-Denham Springs, to authorize parishes to hold elections to determine whether they want to allow the first \$150,000 value of homes occupied by disabled veterans to remain tax-free. State law now says that the first \$75,000 value of all homeowners homes are exempt from property taxes.

House Bill 276 by Rep. Walt Leger III, D-New Orleans, to remove the requirement that a public agency must offer to sell back to the owner property expropriated as a threat to public health.

House Bill 940 by Rep. Jack Montoucet, D-Scott, to require a defendant who wants to waive a trial by jury to make an "irrevocable" decision at least 45 days before the trial begins.

Two of the six proposals approved last year on the Oct. 2 ballot would start and end legislative sessions two weeks earlier and make the director of the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness and the office's top deputies subject to the unclassified pay system not controlled by state Civil Service.