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Lawmakers propose 90 amendments

Property rights, term limits targeted

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BATON ROUGE -- Ninety proposed changes in the state Constitution have been filed for debate at the March 27 legislative session, including 20 dealing with property rights and expropriation procedures and at least 15 dealing with term limits of public officials and the abolition of local or state offices.

Fifty-eight proposed constitutional changes were filed in the House and 32 in the Senate. The 90 filed is 10 more than in 2004, the last year lawmakers met in general session, said House Clerk Alfred "Butch" Speer.

"It is a little higher but not unusually high," Speer said. The modern record for introduction of proposed changes in the state charter is 176 filed for the 1997 session, according to the Louisiana News Bureau, a bill-tracking service.

The 90 proposals were among more than 1,800 bills filed in advance of the general session that runs from March 27 through June 19. Friday was the House deadline to file constitutional proposals; the Senate's deadline was Thursday.

At least 20 proposals have been filed to limit the state's power to take private property for economic development purposes. Most of the measures would allow the taking of property only for rights of way or other "public purposes" after the owner is compensated.

'An eclectic mix'

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a government watchdog agency, said if tradition holds, about 10 percent of the measures filed to change the state charter will survive the two-thirds vote of the Legislature. The proposals then would need the approval of a majority of the state's voters this fall.

"It is a real eclectic mix" of topics, Brandt said. "They are all over the waterfront."

He said some are measures that are introduced almost annually, like House Bill 644 by Rep. John Alario, D-Westwego, to increase from \$100,000 to \$150,000 the value of a home before it can be subject to property taxes. Others such as separate measures filed by Sens. Ann Duplessis, D-New Orleans; Willie Mount, D-Lake Charles; and Reps. Austin Badon, D-New Orleans; Tim Burns, R-Mandeville; and Pete Schneider, R-Slidell, would cut the number of assessors in New Orleans from seven to one.

Meanwhile, Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, has filed House Bill 295 that would abolish all assessors' jobs in the state and create one statewide assessor to be named by the governor.

Term limits revisited

The number of terms officials can serve in office also drew lawmakers' attention, as more than half of them are headed into their final two years in office, the effects of a three-term limit imposed several years ago.

Mount has filed Senate Bill 176, which limits to three terms the jobs of members of the state Public Service Commission, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the appointed state Civil Service

Commission and the management boards of the state university systems and the Board of Regents, the coordinating agency for higher education. Members of those agencies are not bound to term limits now.

Sen. Mike Smith, D-Winnfield, has filed Senate Bill 265 to limit the governor to one four-year term starting after 2008. It would not preclude Gov. Kathleen Blanco from seeking a second term

The constitution now limits lawmakers to three terms and the governor to two, but all statewide elected officials can serve an unlimited number of terms, unless House Bill 428 by Rep. Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, passes. It would limit the statewide officers other than the governor to three consecutive terms in the same office.

Sen. Charles Jones, D-Monroe, has filed Senate Bill 273 to repeal the 12-year maximum time lawmakers can serve in the House or Senate. Sen. Max Malone, R-Shreveport, has countered with Senate Bill 277, which would bar a three-term House member from running for the Senate or a three-term senator from running for the House.

Jones also has filed Senate Bill 293 to extend by one year, through January 2009, the terms of lawmakers now in office. He also filed a Senate Bill 301, which would move the elections for all statewide officials and legislators to coincide with congressional elections starting in 2008. State officials are up for re-election in 2007.

Other proposed changes in the state Constitution include:

-- Senate Bill 233 by Malone, which would make the lieutenant governor the presiding officer of the Senate but not give him or her a vote unless there is a tie.

-- House Bill 99 by Rep. Mike Walsworth, R-West Monroe, to abolish the lieutenant governor's office and turn the job functions over to the secretary of state.

-- House Bill 429 by Rep. Hollis Downs, R-Ruston, which would make the job of secretary of state appointive rather than elective. The governor would appoint the secretary of state based on specific criteria, officials said.

-- House Bill 562 by Rep. Mike Powell, R-Shreveport, to establish a process to give state lawmakers a pay raise, which would have to be approved by voters.

-- Senate Bill 274 by Malone, to require the state Judiciary Commission to come up with a program for drug-testing elected judges.

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