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Revisions to state constitution a concern

Groups critical of trivial changes

- By [MICHELLE MILLHOLLON](#)
- Advocate Capitol News Bureau
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Members of two public policy groups were critical Monday of lawmakers' frequent amendments to the state constitution.

But the time is not ripe, they said, to rewrite the constitution from scratch because voters are too distrustful of the state's leaders.

The latest proposed amendments — on the Nov. 4 ballot — include a change in the number of days necessary to call a special session and the appointment of a successor in case the two legislators who are in the military are called to active duty.

“We’ve got to stop putting these type of details in the constitution,” Barry Erwin, president of Council for A Better Louisiana, told the Press Club of Baton Rouge.

However, Erwin and Jennifer Pike, research director for the Public Affairs Research Council, said the time does not appear to be ripe to rewrite the state constitution.

Rewriting the constitution requires a constitutional convention called by two-thirds of the Legislature. The revised constitution would then have to be approved by a majority of voters.

Voters are too distrustful because of a legacy of political corruption in Louisiana, Pike said.

“We don’t trust the governor. We don’t trust the Legislature,” Erwin agreed.

He predicted a constitutional convention will happen eventually. The current constitution dates to 1974.

But Pike said there will have to be a trigger other than just a desire to shorten the constitution.

Seven proposed changes to the state constitution are on the Nov. 4 ballot.

The most significant proposals include an increase in the amount of severance tax revenue that parishes receive and the imposition of term limits on members of a number of state boards and commissions.

PAR did not take a position on any of the proposed amendments. CABL supported all of them.

Erwin did question the need for several of the amendments.

One amendment would impose a limit of three consecutive terms for members of the Public Service Commission, State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and several university boards. After three terms, the members would have to sit out for two years.

Erwin noted the change still would allow members of some boards to serve 18 years because of the length of the terms.

An amendment to change from five to seven the number of days' notice needed for a special session would add another layer of detail to the state constitution, Pike said.

With the military successor amendment, Erwin questioned whether legislators are trying to add too many things to the constitution.

The change would allow someone to be appointed to fill in for a legislator who is called to serve in the military for at least six months.

Erwin said the amendment probably would not be utilized very often.

Other amendments would:

- Allow certain property owners to keep a tax break if their home is seized by the government.
- Lift restrictions on expropriated blighted property.
- Allow a portion of public employees' post-employment benefits, such as health care, to be invested in stocks.

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