

Opinions

Amendment season

Every year like falling leaves the amendments to Louisiana's state constitution rain down on our ballot. There are four more this year that are proposed to join the other 204 amendments previously added since our eleventh constitution was adopted in 1974. On an average the voters have been asked to change the structure of their government more than four times a year every year since ratification of the state's foundational legal document 47 years ago. State constitutions elsewhere are amended with similar regularity.

James Gill, writing for NOLA.com, observes that our state constitution "empowers a parish to accept a gift of second-hand asphalt from the state." He further notes that, "Nothing is too trivial for our constitution". He invites us to bear this in mind the next time we're told that a constitution is "organic" law that "establishes broad governance principles and fundamental rights."

This has been my complaint for almost two decades ever since I began showing up at the polls in Louisiana to be greeted annually by a wall poster asking me to change my state's foundational document in order that we might give ourselves a tax increase rather than hold elected representatives chosen to study such matters accountable for it.

There's a page on Facebook dedicated to promoting the amendments and I have written a few caustic comments that tend to go unanswered. I'm not sure if they're being polite or they just don't know why it's a bad faith argument to claim you're lowering taxes by having only one rate (4.75%) for everyone when previously there were two rates lower for lesser incomes. In any case, the schedule of tax rates referenced in the Booster story are nowhere to be found in the actual proposed amendments. So, where do they come from? Why aren't they in the constitution?

Not to mention you're giving the legislature the option at some point to disallow the deductibility of Federal income taxes when calculating your Louisiana income tax liability.

The fact that both State Senator Womack (R,32) and State Representative Riser (R,20) support the amendments is remarkably small comfort compared to how little evidence of thought or effort either of them appears to have given to the trivialization of our constitution and the legislature's abdication of its responsibility to the public.

Frankly, the first two proposed amendments are nothing but another tax grab anyway. They make the legislature's, and maybe the tax

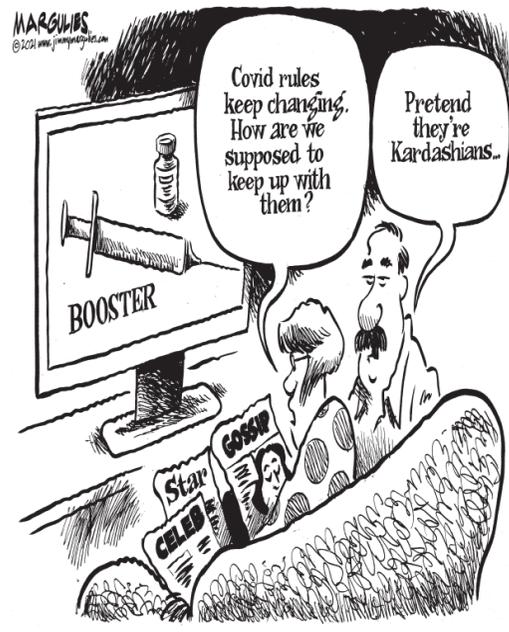
collectors', job easier but it's always doubtful when politicians want to raise rates because revenues are down or programs have been expanded. In any case, these are not proper constitutional questions. They belong in the chambers of the state house and senate, not on the ballot where they are sprung like a trap on a public ambushed without adequate time or resources to investigate the issues.

On September 1st, 2021, the Catahoula News Booster published a page one photo of Womack, Riser, House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, and Representative Gabe Firment posing in support of proposed Amendments 1 and 2. The article talks about capping top tax rates, reducing the number of tax brackets, "streamlining" our sales tax collection.

But the real money line is this quote from the Booster article: "More purchases are made off the internet now and according to Riser under the new legislation there would be less opportunity for remote sellers to loop around paying the sales tax."

Think about that last sentence: Neither "remote sellers" nor local sellers pay sales taxes; consumers pay sales taxes; you pay sales taxes. It's not a tax increase on businesses; it's a tax increase on you.

By: Leo Chappelle



JEB Tales

Take Me to My Dodge

In the fall of 1954 or 1955, my grandfather George Lorn Bartmess, came driving up to our house in Jug Bend, Louisiana in an old 1938 or 1939 Dodge panel truck. He had recently retired from the Hudson Automobile Manufacturing plant in Detroit, Michigan, where he had painted Hudson cars since before World War II.

To say that "Grandpaw" George was a little eccentric would be an understatement. The first thing he made clear of was that no one was to call him Grandfather, Grandpaw, or Mister anything. Folks were to call him George. Since we already had my brother George in the family, we were instructed to call him "Dad."

There was a small sharecropper's shotgun house on our place that my father Big John Bartmess, Sr. had built for Olander Watson who lived in it for a few years. The little house was now empty. "Dad" looked at the little house and said, "If it could be moved to the lake, he would like to live in it." Mr. Melvin Nugent who operated the Catahoula Parish road grader agreed to try to move the shotgun house with the road grader. The little house must have been well built because it survived the move. Remembering this house moving episode, I realize that using the parish owned road grader to move a privately owned building today would get the grader operator fired and the Police Jury member charged with a crime. So why did Mr. Nugent do this and why did Mr. Emmitt Haygood, the ward five police jurymen give his permission? Times were different, people wanted to help other people. Also, I think the two main reasons were that my father and Mr. Nugent were both World War II veterans and I was one of Mr. Emmitt's favorite kids to ride his school bus. The reason for that was that after we had picked all our cotton, I would ride Mr. Emmitt's school bus to his house after school and help him get his cotton picked. I did that for two reasons, Mr. Emmitt paid me, and Mrs. Inez cooked a wonderful supper. It also did not hurt that Mr. Emmitt and Mrs. Inez had a beautiful daughter that was two years older than me.

Remember the 1939 Dodge Panel truck? My brother George and I loved it. "Dad" would let us take it to town although neither of us had a driver's license. We were always supposed to get it back to Dad's house before dark because the headlights would not work most of the time. We solved this little problem by turning the blinkers, "turn signals" on, which had been mounted on top of the front fenders. This gave us enough light to see the road, not very far down the road but enough to keep the old dodge between the ditches. Once, I was riding with Dad, when we got to the junction of the Jug Bend Road and Highway Louisiana 124 (the Harrisonburg, Enterprise Road) Dad did not stop for the stop sign, he did not even slow down! When I told him that was very dangerous and against the law, he said, "Everyone knows I live down this road."

When "Dad" turned 65 years old he started getting a small check each month called an "Old Age Pension" check. He then decided he

By John Ed Bartmess, Jr.

needed a more up to date vehicle. Mr. Johnny Nugent who owned and operated a garage and body shop had an early 1950's black and white mercury car for sale.

It was so up to date that it had a newfangled automatic transmission. But like many new ideas it had its drawbacks. On a standard transmission if a vehicle would not start you could park it on a hill and let it begin rolling down the hill and you could usually get it started. However, on the car with the automatic transmission you had to pull it or push it up to around thirty or forty miles per hour to get it started.

Dad bought the car. One cool morning the mercury car would not start. My father, Big John, took his one-ton work truck to push Dad's mercury fast enough to get it started. It did not start. But Dad who had somewhat of a temper, pushed the accelerator to the floor to blow the soot out and the accelerator stuck wide open. Big John had turned his truck around and headed back to our house. As I was going out the back door of our house to go to the lot to feed the hogs and horses, I saw Dad's mercury going faster and faster down the road lickety split! I mean it was going faster and faster and faster! When he got to the levee that we drove across at the end of Sargent Lake on he left the levee and went airborne. He hit a cypress tree that was about eight to ten inches in diameter that was beside the levee and the tree went almost all the way down and then popped back up.

I ran to meet Big John and jumped on the running board and shouted, "Dad has had a wreck!" When we got to the lake, Dad's Mercury was on its side at the base of the levee. As I got to the car, "Dad" was trying to crawl out of the upside window. His hat was gone, and his glasses were hanging beside his face by one ear.

All Dad said was, "Take me back to my Dodge."

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