

Do we really need a state treasurer?

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The timing couldn't be better for a conversation about eliminating the position of state treasurer. Or at least dumping the gig as we know it today.

Voters will select the next treasurer on Oct. 14, or more than likely on Nov. 18 should the contest advance to a runoff. There's no incumbent, so technically none of the candidates are working to protect their job.

It's been 17 years since Louisiana hosted an open race for treasurer, which in turn prompted seven contenders to qualify for the position. There are four Republicans, a Democrat, an Independent and a Libertarian. Among them are six men and one woman. Two are black and five are white. They hail from Baton Rouge, Columbia, Harvey, Lafayette, Opelousas and Ponchatoula.

The field is a diverse bunch. But there's something missing.

One of the higher-profile candidates should be campaigning on the promise that they'll eliminate the elected job. It would certainly capture the attention of the electorate, most of which is completely unaware that an election cycle has just gotten underway. It would also generate a debate about streamlining a corner of government that has gone overlooked for too long.

There's already a readymade, hire-me-to-fire-me campaign template to follow. In 1999, Suzanne Haik Terrell of New Orleans won her bid for election commissioner by, in part, vowing to bury the job. During her term she did just that and oversaw the merging of her department with the Secretary of State's Office.

Baton Rouge attorney E. Eric Guirard also had a "hire-me-to-fire-me" platform in 1995 when he ran for lieutenant governor. At times the effort was as humorous as the TV commercials Guirard produces for his law practice. "If the governor dies, I'll resign," he told The Shreveport Times 22 years ago. "You don't want me as your governor."

Voters viewed Guirard's PR blitz as more of a sideshow, worth about 5% of the total electorate in the 1995 primary. Terrell and her messaging, meanwhile, managed to topple a well-known politico in a runoff four years later with 59% of the vote.

So a serious effort that avoids gimmicks could gain traction this cycle. There's no denying that voters are ready to hear something different. Platitudes may even be toxic in this red state that President Donald Trump won. More importantly, voters are also well aware that government is a work in progress.

This conversation should start with an understanding of what exactly the state treasurer does. First and foremost, the treasurer is Louisiana's official banker and accountant. Keeping records of how much state money is received and spent; managing debt and investments; and advising and serving on the Bond Commission are among the duties the treasurer is charged with upon being elected.

It's a serious job. But do voters really need to be involved in electing such a figurehead? There are currently 16 states that don't even have elected treasurers. In 12 of those states the position is appointed and in four of them the Legislature selects a treasurer.

The dismantling operation here wouldn't be nearly as complicated as some believe. The treasurer's office in Louisiana could easily be merged with the Division of Administration, which is the lead budget agency in the state. It could also be swallowed up by the Revenue Department, which already plays a critical role in revenue collections and projections.

There's plenty of overlap between these areas of state government—so much so that someone should be crunching the numbers to investigate possible cost savings and target duplications of services.

But let's slow down a bit. Obviously there's another side to this story.

Voters deserve direct accountability on fiscal issues, and there's no better way to keep a bureaucrat on a short democratic leash than to have them regularly ask the public if they can please—Please!—keep their job.

Plus there's an unwritten responsibility of the treasurer in Louisiana, a role ushered in by U.S. Sen. John Kennedy when he held the post, to serve as the unofficial watchdog of state government. Voters love a politician with a bite, or short of that a loud bark. And that role is best filled by someone with an elected pulpit.

An alternative route would involve beefing up the position of treasurer, rather than eliminating the job. Texas, for example, has an elected comptroller who serves as the state's chief tax collector,

lead accountant, revenue estimator and treasurer. That's an election-worthy gig.

But that's not what we have in Louisiana today. We instead have an elected position with a much smaller reach.

Just ponder this question: If the job of treasurer in Louisiana were eliminated today, how would your state government and your life be changed tomorrow?

How you answer that question is probably an indication of where this public conversation should be headed. If a conversation is had at all.

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