

Chatter About Constitutional Convention Grows

April 11, 2017 By [Jeremy Alford](#)

The Louisiana Constitution that was approved by voters in 1974 has been amended 186 times since its inception. And it's still nowhere close to being a perfect document.

In fact, barely a year goes by where a lawmaker doesn't file legislation to start the process for another convention — and the Legislature always responds by rejecting or ignoring the notion.

Ways and Means Chairman Neil Abramson is one of those legislators, and he's back to push the same issue during the regular session that convened this week. This time, however, Abramson has more of a wind at his back, although it has very little to do with anything of his own making.

Three legislative sessions in 2016 that failed to yield substantive fiscal reforms and the lack of confidence surrounding this year's session have created an unmistakable undercurrent. Lawmakers, lobbyists and political stakeholders are all discussing the idea of a convention with greater frequency in private meetings and briefings.

In short, a buzz is slowly growing.

That's why Abramson firmly believes that it's time to start seriously considering another constitutional convention in Louisiana. But that's easier said than done.

The only reason delegates were able to convene a convention 44 years ago is because former Gov. Edwin Edwards, as a candidate, made it a central talking point during his campaign. That's a breeze of hope that Abramson and other advocates may not be able to duplicate.

But Abramson does have House Bill 456 filed for the ongoing regular session that will give lawmakers an option. The legislation creates a special study committee that would determine if a convention is even needed. Moreover, the committee would create a draft constitution and a roadmap for how a convention would operate.

If lawmakers agree with this approach, the convention committee would have roughly 16 months to compile its research. That's a longer span of time than delegates to the 1973 convention had to do their job. But unlike those delegates, this special committee would have no real power outside of its advisory role.

If that committee does decide to endorse the need for a convention, Abramson's bill would convene one on Jan. 7, 2019. Taking a cue from the 1973 exercise, this proposed convention would have 105 delegates elected from each state House district and another 27 delegates who would be appointed to make sure different perspectives and special interest groups have a place at the proverbial table.

One the loudest complaints about having another convention involve the ability of delegates to alter anything they want in the document. No one wants to give delegates free rein to change every corner of the state's guiding charter.

Abramson meets this concern head-on by limiting the proposed convention to changes related to "state and local finance, raising revenue, allocation and expenditure of funds, education funding, and higher education."

This is a concept that could gain favor in the Legislature this session. Abramson, a Democrat, already has three Republicans as co-authors, including Reps. Paula Davis, Steve Carter and Franklin Foil. "All three of us were looking seriously at this issue and we decided to work with Neil rather than filing different instruments," Davis said.

She's not alone in this sentiment. Rep. Phillip DeVillier has had discussions with community groups in his district about the possibility and he said the reception has been warm. "As far as I'm concerned, the only way we're going to put this state on the right path without raising taxes is to look and see where everything is tied down in the constitution," he said.

Abramson added in a recent interview that he feels "stronger" than ever before about the need for a new convention. "What you're finding is that this year there is more recognition by others that it is too difficult right now to fix this fiscal situation in a piecemeal fashion," he said. "That's why you're going to see more people focused on supporting this."

If Abramson has his druthers, the enacting legislation calls for a final convention document to be completed by May 30, 2019. And that, in turn, would present voters with a big choice during the fall statewide elections where gubernatorial and legislative candidates will be running for office.

If nothing else, that process would certainly get the state's top tier political contenders talking about a topic that should have been in circulation during the last statewide election cycle in 2015.

Given the current political climate, the partisan gridlock at the Capitol and the lack of successes in recent legislative sessions, it's a discussion that should start immediately. Because if there's a better path to reform, we haven't seen it yet.