Citizens to Have Say in Constitution

By C.M. HARGRODER
(Times-Picayune Staff Correspondent)

BATON ROUGE, La. - The best bargain any citizen ever had from government is the right to take a direct hand in shaping the laws under which he lives. It rarely comes, but 1973 is the year of the citizen, voter or not.

For this year, Louisiana is writing a new constitution, and every one has the opportunity to say what should and what should not go into that constitution.

First and foremost is the chance that will be afforded to the people of every area of the state to let the constitutional convention know what they think should be in the state's charter. When the composite committee tours the state to get just this reaction, the individual citizen will have the right to appear before the committee and speak his mind.

THAT INFORMATION WILL be channeled back to the committees writing the articles that will comprise the constitution to guide them in their work. Then, when the committees submit what they believe the public has said to the full convention returning in July, the individual citizen again will have a chance to appear and challenge anything that the committees either misunderstood or misinterpreted as the will of the people.

Of course, the final say of the citizen will come when the document is sent to the polls for approval or disapproval. But no one who does not exercise these rights before then should allow his apathy alone to permit a negative vote.

There have been some dire predictions from experts to laymen that Louisiana voters will never approve a new constitution. That could be wishful thinking on the part of some who would rather see the state smothered under the archaic instrument we now have, perhaps those who benefit most from it.

The slow, tedious and cumbersome pace of a convention's machinery causes impatient critics to say the convention's committee system is mired in unnecessary detail. Obviously a document whose authors hope will survive without the need of annual revision (as has almost been the case with the current constitution) needs more cautious approaches than the hurry-burly of the legislature which has spawned so many amendments in the past.

THESE WHO would say the committee system spends unnecessary time in detailed examination of the issues obviously would welcome a framable constitution now, only to point an accusing finger later at the delegates should they succumb to the easy option of speed as opposed to a deliberative pace.

What the public is hearing now from committee discussions represents examination, not determination or decision. The time for decision is later, and not now.

Convention critics had best await the constitution in the final form in which it is submitted to the ultimate decision—the vote—before they carp at what it will contain. Surely, the convention deserves a chance to produce that document.