Constitutional Convention Halfway Home This Week

By CHARLES LAYTON

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP)—As of this week, the Constitutional Convention is halfway home.

Its committees have written and published suggested drafts of articles for what they hope will become the constitution of 1974, and the full convention comes together Thursday for six months of debate. Although the committee reports are only proposals, a starting point for debate, they reflect a general trend of thinking on the part of the delegates.

And in the highly unlikely event that all the committee reports should be adopted in their present form, and ratified by the voters, here is what the new constitution would look like:

The state court system would remain about the same, composed of district courts, circuit courts of appeal and a supreme court, all manned by elected judges.

MORE FLEXIBLE

The legislature would look about the same too, but would be more flexible and have a stronger committee system. There would be annual, regular sessions of no more than 60 meeting days within a 120-day period.

The lieutenant governor would no longer serve as presiding officer of the senate, and in fact, no member of one body of government would be allowed to function in any other branch.

In the executive branch, the landscape would change significantly. Instead of 11 statewide elected officials, there would be only five to seven.

Furthermore, all state agencies would be merged into no more than 20 major departments.

One committee has suggested doing away with the agriculture commissioner, su reintendent of education, insurance commissioner, comptroller, register of state lands and custodian of voting machines as elected officials.

Another committee, however, proposes keeping the agriculture commissioner elective, and another proposes to keep an elected education superintendent.

BY FOUR BOARDS

Education would be governed by four boards, including a 17-member board of regents which would plan and coordinate for the other three.

The state board of education would become a board of elementary and secondary education, with eight elective members and seven members appointed by the governor.

Two boards of 17 appointed members each would govern higher education, one for the LSU system and one for the other state colleges and universities.

Gov. Edwin Edwards asked convention delegates last January to write a purely skeletal constitution, devoid of all statutory matters.

So far, the delegates have not followed Edwards' advice, but have retained such details as the makeup of the education boards, a lengthy section on civil service, specific tax exemptions and limitations, and provisions for such agencies as the Wild Life and Fisheries Commission, the Forestry Commission and the Public Service Commission.

On the other hand, the committee has moved in the general direction of a shorter, simpler constitution, removing all sorts of details about garbage, drainage, and sewerage districts, port harbor and terminal districts, and a host of other local matters.

Blacks would benefit from a number of the proposals. The bill of rights, for instance, would place more emphasis on individual rights and would explicitly prohibit racial discrimination although carefully avoiding requirements for any kind of "quota" system.

The State Civil Service Commission would be restructured to ensure black representation, and there would be guarantees of black representation on all of the education boards.

Finally, local governments would be given a freer hand in running their own affairs, by means of a broad, general grant of powers. Local governments, in fact, would be allowed all authority not specifically denied them by the constitution or the legislature. One purpose of this new approach is to keep voters from having to approve dozens of constitutional amendments on purely local matters every time there is a statewide election.

The voters revolt against the tiresome list of amendment, it will be recalled, was one of the pressures that led to the constitutional convention in the first place.