Education fund amendment important

By KATY SMITH
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Local governments are hungry for state dollars and would greedily eat up money currently set aside for a Louisiana Education Quality Trust Fund.

That's why it should be written into the state Constitution, said supporters of proposed Constitutional Amendment No. 1 at a forum Tuesday. The forum was sponsored by Lafayette Citizens for Public Education.

“Our organization feels that by far, this amendment is the most important on the (Sept. 27) ballot,” said Winston Day, executive director of the Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL). “It is going to determine the future of Louisiana for generations to come.”

The trust will begin with about $615 million from the 8(g) offshore oil lease settlement with the federal government, said John Bertrand, Acadia's representative on the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). A percentage of future money from the settlement will be invested in the fund until it reaches a cap of $2 billion in about the year 2035.

Interest generated by the fund’s investment will be divided equally between BESE and higher education, Bertrand added.

A parent and local attorney, Walter Landry, criticized the amendment for being too long and detailed. The seven-page document would lengthen the Constitution by five to 10 percent, he said.

The detail is designed to keep the Legislature from redirecting the funds and to make sure it goes to “enhance” the education system, said state Rep. Kathleen Blanco, who serves on the House’s Education Committee.

“There is a lot of competition for state dollars,” Blanco said. The amendment is a chance to make sure education is given first priority, she said.

Landry said he was also concerned that the Board of Regents and BESE were given power over how the money is spent.

“I trust the Legislature more than some of these boards,” Landry said.

“We feel we need to remove education from the daily business of politics,” Blanco replied.

Each year the boards have to come before the Legislature for approval of programs proposed for funding, said Dr. James Caillier, USL vice president of University Affairs. The boards only act as administrators of the programs, he pointed out.

Day said, “It is to enhance education, to improve education. Not to simply hand out money to individual districts.” The money also isn’t supposed to replace Minimum Foundation Formula financing, although it is providing funds for some discontinued programs, he explained.

Two of those programs noted by Bertrand are Special Plan for Upgrading Reading (SPUR) and the Louisiana School for Science and Arts. They are allocated $295,000 and $300,000 respectively for the first year of funding.

Programs allocated $1 million under BESE include: governor’s scholarship program; foreign language programs; and a principals’ academy.

“We need to keep bright high school graduates in Louisiana colleges,” Bertrand said. “So often, they go out of state and stay out of state.”

Other programs include: studies of the wo-tech system and a possible high school graduation test; pilot programs designed improve academic achievement or vocational skills; and a mentor teacher program.

Money for higher education will be used for programs to “enhance economic development” by funding research, endowment chairs for eminent scholars and recruiting superior graduate students, Day said.

USL is slated to benefit directly as $1 million is allocated for its Computer Aided Design/Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAD/CAM) center, he added.

Failure of the amendment to pass would send a “disastrous message” to the Legislature and other states, Day continued. “The message would be that we are not willing to make the investment we need in education,” he said.

Without that investment, Louisiana will never pull itself out of its present economic doldrums, Bertrand said. Mississippi made that investment and is leaving Louisiana with the dubious position as last in education, he said.