Gov. Edwin Edwards' change in the thrust of his constitutional convention proposal drew good reviews Wednesday from top legislative leaders and a key lawmaker who opposed the original plan.

Senate President Sammy Nunez, D-Chalmette, predicted on Wednesday that the "new direction" in which Edwards is going — having the 144-member Legislature serve as the convention body — will win legislative approval.

And he said he supports the idea. Edwards is scheduled to go before the House and Governmental Affairs Committee today to discuss the change, which will involve having the Legislature serve as convention delegates. The convention would convene after Labor Day and have a proposition ready to go to voters this fall.

"All 144 of us in one room, which is probably the best way to go in my estimation," Nunez said.

House Speaker John Alario, D-Westwego, said he thinks Edwards has "hit upon "a good compromise."

"It allows legislators to do their job, it saves us a lot of money instead having special elections to do it, and it helps speed up the process," Alario said.

The original Edwards plan that has cleared the Senate called for 85 delegates, with 50 elected this fall from various newly created districts and the remainder either automatic by virtue of their position or appointed by the governor. Under that plan, the convention would have begun Dec. 1 and finished work by Feb. 12, 1993. The proposition would not have gone to voters until April 1993.

Because the new convention concept will get a proposal to voters this fall, it speeds up the process of dealing with crumbling state finances. It also will save much of the $5.6 million costs associated with the convention and its related elections expenses because there won't be a need for delegate elections.
Alario said the compromise brings in “the reasonable people who had some legitimate concerns” about abdicating legislative responsibility in fiscal matters.

Rep. Mitch Landrieu, D-New Orleans, one of a group of anti-convention forces in the House, said the new plan solves Edwards’ problems as well as that of many lawmakers who feel it is a legislative responsibility to develop fiscal policy.

“He gets his convention and is able to keep his campaign promise and it also allows us to do our job,” Landrieu said.

“I think it works well,” he said.

Landrieu said he would rather have tackled tax restructuring and spending restraints during the current legislative session, “but that got to be impossible” because of the lateness of the hour.

“I think this is more palatable to the body as a whole,” Landrieu said.

He said it is less costly, allows legislators to do the job and completes the process earlier to allow for better fiscal planning.

Edwards’ plan that passed the Senate had been expected to encounter problems in the House. With a two-thirds vote required for passage, it would have been an uphill climb.

Edwards floor leader Rep. Elias “Bo” Ackal, D-New Iberia, said he also likes the idea.

“It’s our obligation as elected representatives. Why should we be shirking our responsibility,” said Ackal, who chairs the Appropriations Committee. “There’s no guarantee what is going to come out of it, but at least we know what’s really needed in reference to solving some of the fiscal problems.”

In a convention setting, a majority vote would send constitutional amendments to voters. If done in the Legislature, a two-thirds vote would be required.