Proponents cite need for 8g amendment OK

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LAFAYETTE — The state's prosperity depends heavily on passage of a constitutional amendment dedicating a federal offshore revenue settlement to education, proponents of the measure said here Tuesday night.

The 8g amendment, to be voted on statewide in the Sept. 27 election, was promoted during a forum conducted by Lafayette Citizens for Public Education. About 40 people attended.

Winston Day, executive director of the Council for a Better Louisiana, told the citizens that the amendment is the most important item on the upcoming ballot.

"It's going to determine the future of Louisiana for many years to come," he said.

In order for the state's economy to improve, advances must be made in Louisiana's educational system, he said.

Approval of the amendment will not only provide more money for education, he said, it also will be a symbolic gesture to the rest of the nation that Louisiana is improving education.

Defeat of the amendment will imply "we are not willing to make the investment in the future of Louisiana," Day said.

The amendment would dedicate $505 million for a trust fund to generate money for improvements to the state's secondary, vocational-technical and higher education. The money comes from the settlement of a dispute with the federal government over the offshore oil revenues along the Louisiana Gulf coast.

Day said the enemies of the amendment include apathy, anger and confusion.

Day remarked that many public officials have remained silent on the amendment, and Louisiana constitutional amendments have been rejected by voters frequently. Also, many voters are angry at the state's condition, and they will reject all of the amendments, he said.

Confusion is to be expected because of the numerous items on the ballot, including seven amendments, Day said.

He said some have criticized the oil-revenue amendment because it is too detailed to be added to the Constitution. But Day said the amendment specifies how the money is to be spent.

Dr. John Bertrand, a member of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, said a campaign must be carried out to ensure passage of the measure.

"Complacency will defeat the amendment if we let it," Bertrand said.

He told the group that a member of Gov. Edwin Edwards' staff has given the amendment a 55 percent chance of passage.

Bertrand said the trust fund would provide money for several needs, including:

- Foreign language instruction.
- A study on consolidating state vocational-technical schools.
- A program to reward good teachers.
- Continuation of a statewide state assessment program.
- Mandatory testing of graduating high-school students.
- An academy to train principals.
- Adult education.
- More textbook purchases.

"Until and unless this state makes education its No. 1 priority, it will not get out of the doldrums," Bertrand said.

Lafayette attorney Walter Landry complained that the amendment is too detailed.

But state Rep. Kathleen Blanco commented that the amendment is lengthy because it specifies how the money is to be spent. She said the Legislature will spend the money if it isn't dedicated.

"We need to remove education from the daily politics as much as possible," she said.

State Rep. Ron Gomez agreed with Blanco and said the Legislature has become too involved with education in the past 10 to 15 years.