

# Coalition urges voters to oppose a Convention

**More than 20 community groups have banded together to persuade voters that a Constitutional Convention could cost \$2 million and do more harm than good.**

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**BY LIZ ANDERSON**  
**Journal State House Bureau**

PROVIDENCE -- Lila Sapinsley, who chaired the government committee at the state's last Constitutional Convention, 18 years ago, said yesterday her experience should serve as a warning for voters.

Sapinsley, a Republican and former Senate minority leader, said she ran as a delegate to the Convention because she hoped to address a series of "good government issues," from a line-item veto for the governor to reforming the judicial selection process "in a nonpartisan way."

But Sapinsley said those issues were never debated because the Democrat-dominated General Assembly didn't want to take them up.

"Of course I was extremely naive," Sapinsley said. "I want to say to the people of Rhode Island: please do not repeat my mistake and that of others . . . There is nothing in Rhode Island in terms of government that can be nonpolitical."

Sapinsley spoke at the old state house on Benefit Street in Providence as a coalition of more than 20 community groups announced its opposition to holding a Constitutional Convention.

Voters will be asked Nov. 2, in Question 2 on the ballot, whether to convene such a body, which could debate and recommend amendments to the state Constitution. Any proposals would still need to be ratified by voters in the next general election, in 2006.

One after the other, representatives of several of the groups argued that a Convention carried too high a price tag and too much risk.

The coalition members, calling themselves the "Citizens for Representative Government," stood before a sign that urged people to "Reject 2; Costs \$2 million; And could do more harm than good."

A preparatory commission that studied what issues could be addressed at a Convention had estimated the price tag of a Convention could be \$2 million or more, depending on how the Assembly decides to structure and staff it.

Steven Brown, director of the Rhode Island Affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the costs were not limited to the Convention itself, but should include the campaigns that would be run by people hoping to secure the 75 delegate seats, one for each House district. Another speaker added on the price tag for interest groups' lobbying efforts for and against any proposed amendments.

Brown said the last Convention showed such bodies pose a "significant danger to civil rights." For example, he noted, the last Convention changed the rules regarding when convicted felons become eligible again to vote.

He said the Constitution is "not some student's 10th-grade essay that every few years we get together and edit it to try to make it look a little better." Brown also expressed concern that delegates, who do not have to stand for reelection, are less accountable for their actions than lawmakers.

H. Philip West Jr., executive director of Common Cause of Rhode Island, said a Convention serves as a way out for citizens when the Assembly refuses to pass a bill to put an important amendment before voters.

"The question is whether people need that safety valve right now," he said.

West maintains the better route to change is through the legislature, where proposals can be publicly debated and refined before passage.

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Exhibit I

Karen Malcolm, associate director of Ocean State Action, said a delegate election would favor candidates with money, and the cost of a Convention would make less money available in the state budget for education, housing and property tax relief.

Other groups raising concerns included Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island, which noted in a statement that the last Convention produced an amendment that could have restricted women's access to abortions. While the amendment failed when put before voters, the issue could be raised at a new Convention, the group warned.

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#### **Coalition members**

American Association of University Women, RI  
Common Cause of Rhode Island  
National Association of Social Workers, RI Chapter  
NEA/RI  
Ocean State Action  
Planned Parenthood of RI  
Poverty Institute at RIC  
RI ACORN  
RI affiliate, American Civil Liberties Union  
RI Affirmative Action Coalition  
RI AFL-CIO  
RI Alliance for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights  
RI Civil Rights Roundtable  
RI Commission for Human Rights  
RI Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals  
RI Jobs with Justice  
RI Ministers Alliance  
RI Latino Political Action Committee  
2 to 1: The Coalition to Preserve Choice  
Urban League of RI  
Women's Health and Education Fund  
Working Rhode Island

\*The Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council is also opposed to Question 2, but is not part of the coalition.

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Online at: [http://www.projo.com/extra/election/content/projo\\_20041019\\_concon19.ceaec.html](http://www.projo.com/extra/election/content/projo_20041019_concon19.ceaec.html)



**CITIZENS FOR REPRESENTATIVE**  
**GOVERNMENT**

**IN OPPOSITION TO QUESTION #2**

(List in progress)

AMERICAN ASSN. OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN/RI  
COMMON CAUSE OF RI  
HOTEL EMPLOYEES & RESTAURANT EMPLOYEES, LOCAL #217  
NATIONAL ASSN. OF SOCIAL WORKERS/RI CHAPTER  
NEA/RI  
OCEAN STATE ACTION  
PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF RI  
POVERTY INSTITUTE  
RI ACORN  
RI AFFILIATE, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION  
RI AFFIRMATIVE ACTION COALITION  
RI AFL/CIO  
RI ALLIANCE FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CIVIL RIGHTS  
RI CIVIL RIGHTS ROUNDTABLE  
RI COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
RI FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS  
RI JOBS WITH JUSTICE  
RI MINISTERS' ALLIANCE  
RI LATINO POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE  
RI NOW  
2 to 1: THE COALITION TO PRESERVE CHOICE  
URBAN LEAGUE OF RI  
URI CHAPTER/AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS  
WOMEN'S HEALTH AND EDUCATION FUND  
WORKING RHODE ISLAND

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Exhibit II