

Main Identity

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Sent: Monday, November 01, 2004 12:04 PM
Subject: Narragansett Times is for con-con

NarragansettTimes.com

10/20/2004

Question 2: Voice of the people would 'challenge status quo'

By: MARCIA GRANN O'BRIEN

SOUTH KINGSTOWN - "A Constitutional convention challenges the status quo," believes Robert Arruda, chair of Operation Clean Government. And since Rhode Island hasn't held one in 20 years, there's a lot of challenging to be done, in his view. Arruda was one of five panelists at a forum Thursday night co-sponsored by OCG, The Narragansett Times, and the South Kingstown High School chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

The forum was part of the organization's statewide push to pass Question 2 on the November ballot: "Shall there be a convention to amend or revise the Constitution?"

Arruda, who volunteers his time with OCG, noted that the Maxwell School of Government at Syracuse University recently released a study that concluded: "Rhode Island is one of the worst-managed state governments in the country - perennially so." Another study by Maxwell concluded: "Rhode Island is among the least likely states to want to change" the way it operates. Those in power, Arruda said, "like it like this. But do you? A Constitutional convention will give us the tools to see what our government is doing. And I believe in transparency in government."

Former state Rep. Rodney Driver of Richmond was in the General Assembly for eight years, and described his experience as a back-bencher who was never approached by lobbyists. What he thought didn't matter, he said. Only the leadership mattered - so much so that right up through the late 1980s, many legislators stuck pieces of cardboard in the "yes" light by their names. That way they could vote "the right way" even if they were in the lounge, or the halls, or the bathroom.

Even today, Driver asserted, bills are seldom if ever read on the floor, let alone debated.

A Constitutional convention, Driver said, "will reflect the will of the people."

If Question 2 passes, delegates will be elected in 2005, one from each of the 75 House districts in the state. "There are no incumbents," Driver stressed. "Anyone can run."

Whatever changes the convention approved would come before voters, probably in 2006. "Whatever comes out," Driver underscored, "you get the final say."

Former state Senator Donna Walsh, who represented Charlestown, Richmond, Hopkinton and Westerly and a teacher, said some credit needs to be given for changes that have taken place as a result of the last Constitutional convention: the establishment of a Judicial Screening Commission for judges; a four-year term for governor; limiting general officers to two terms; even Question 1, the Separation of Powers issue that took ten years to make it onto the ballot this year.

A Constitutional convention, she said, "is healthy and necessary, to give citizens the opportunity to participate. It's important that we have confidence in the voters."

She predicted that such a convention would also be "a great education process for high school and junior high school kids."

WHJJ talk show host Mike Kehew served for 12 years on the Middletown Town Council, two of them as president. He concluded that "one-tenth of one percent in an entire community are the activists, the real activists."

Noting that "some groups don't want a convention - and they're 'good government' groups," Kehew said, "They get close to the leadership; they praise them when they come around to their way of thinking." But at a Constitutional convention, "anybody has the right to step up and say, 'It's broken.' Bureaucracy is the enemy," he insisted. "It feeds off itself, grows on itself, becomes a base of power and does what it needs to keep power. Some percentage of these absorb incredible power, and they control the game."

Harry Staley, founder and president of the Rhode Island Shoreline Coalition, which currently represents about 3,600 people, noted that "Questions 1 and 2 are separate on the ballot, but they're equally important, so intertwined, so reliant, so dependent are they on each other."

Staley was one of four public citizens to serve on the Bi-Partisan Commission set up by the General Assembly to hold hearings on Question 2; the other eight members were legislators.

They didn't meet for the first time until July 7, and were supposed to report 13 days later, even though "our mission was to go throughout the state and hold hearings," Staley said. That deadline was later extended to August 20, and in the intervening time six hearings were held.

11/1/2004

Staley said only he and one other member attended all the hearings. "The people who came were an extraordinary group, ordinary citizens speaking out eloquently" and offering insight into how the Constitution might be changed and improved. Even so, when the commission held its final meeting, Staley said, he wasn't told about it. "I wasn't told, and I wasn't there. And basically their report came out against a Constitutional convention; there was no enthusiasm for it."

But there was plenty of enthusiasm among the two dozen people at Thursday's forum. One OCG volunteer suggested that each person call ten people, and ask them to call ten people, spreading the word in favor of a Constitutional convention. There will be a final dinner forum sponsored by Operation Clean Government at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Warwick on Monday, October 25, with panelists Gov. Don Carcieri, Justice Robert Flanders, Professor Robert Williams of Rutgers, Senator Mark Cote, Rod Driver, attorney Joe Larisa, and moderator Arlene Violet. For further information call Arruda at 225-7965.

WOONSOCKETCALL.com

10/21/2004

Of Blue Cross, CVS and a constitutional convention

Roger Bouchard , Guest Columnist

Woonsocket

Mount St. Francis Health Center's name has been run through the headlines over the past couple of days. It is important to note that the \$4.5 million in back taxes is owed by the holding company, which has many other interests than the local nursing home. Locally, the place has a great staff and focuses on the care of their patients, according to people who called me and asked to put in a good word for them. The problems involve the activities of the Providence investors rather than the Woonsocket-based staff and administrators.

Providence

Is anyone interested in taking up a collection or running a dynamite supper for Jim Taricani of WJAR-TV in Providence? Jim, along with NBC, has been paying out \$1,000-a-day fine for contempt of court. Just because someone gave him tapes of sensitive court-embargoed material, no one forced them to put the tapes on TV. But Jim felt we needed to know he got the big scoop for his audience. I hope he and his company find it worth the action.

Providence

Blue Cross is another example of corporate arrogance, part one (read part two in the next story). After losing out to United Healthcare to insure 25,000 state employees by charging too much, they want a second chance to bid. The state will save \$25 million over three years with the United deal. Now, Blue Cross temporary CEO James Purcell thinks they can do better after the fact. Anyone interested in sending an e-mail to the governor wanting to help out Blue Cross?

Providence

Not many people have the opportunity or fortitude to corner Tom Ryan of CVS and ask him to explain his company's ethics. But area columnist Charles Bakst at last week's annual dinner of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) went up and asked Ryan about it. Ryan said CVS "still has a great image" in Rhode Island. The journalist was asking about the resignations of Senate President Bill Irons and Sen. John Celona, who chaired the Senate's corporations committee. Irons and Celona are still the focus of Ethics Commission complaints, as federal and state investigators have been probing influence-peddling at the State House. Ryan told the gathering: "We always ask ourselves at CVS: Can we do it easier, can we do it better, can we do it faster, can we do it cheaper?" The company and Ryan say little about the controversy that they helped create and fund. Ryan said instead: "It's not a night for that. It's a night for RIPEC. It's a night to talk about economic development." He refused to discuss investigations. The columnist wrote that Ryan still sees Irons and goes on trips with him. "Shouldn't I? He's a friend." (He said Celona, whom CVS hired as a consultant, is not a friend. "John and I were never close.")

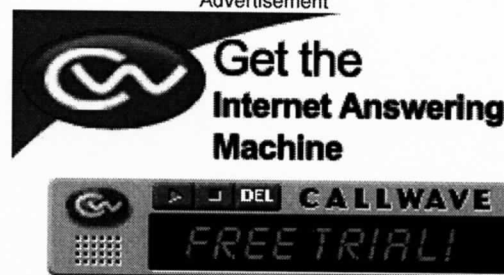
Washington & Woonsocket

As we get closer to Nov. 2, President George W. Bush is responsible for the shortage of flu shots, for rising costs of heating oil and gasoline, for Mount St. Helen's eruption, for the recent hurricanes in Florida, for Dan McKee's primary loss in Cumberland, and for a new stop sign on Harris Avenue. Talking about that new stop sign, one person walked up to me and called it a blessing. The same day an e-mail arrived complaining that to get a stop sign in this community you must do the following: (a) complain to a council member; (b) the council member brings it up under good and welfare; (c) the public safety director orders a traffic study; (d) the police department studies the intersection in question; (e) the council passes legislation; (f) several months later, a new stop sign emerges. It's that simple, writes the reader.

Providence

On Nov. 2, there are 10 reasons to vote in favor of Question 2 on the ballot asking voters to authorize a constitutional convention. The reasons include the American Civil Liberties Union, the Urban League of Rhode Island, the Poverty Institute, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, the National Association of Social Workers

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Rhode Island Chapter, the Rhode Island Ministers' Alliance and the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights. In their narrow and self-serving opinion, they argue the convention isn't needed because the legislative process for putting ballot questions before the voters is working already. Do Rhode Island residents really feel the legislature as presently comprised reflects our collective interests? I don't think so.

Woonsocket

Random notes: The Autumnfest parade will be replayed this Sunday at 7 a.m. on Cox Channel 3, according to Mary Lou Palumbo, who asked me to alert interested readers. Dave Rogers, running for Congress, dropped a bombshell on WNRI's UPFRONT program yesterday when he disclosed that 3,000 Rhode Island jobs in Newport/Middletown will disappear in 2005 as the Pentagon shrinks military installations around the country. Rogers says that U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, U.S. Sen. Jack Reed, U.S. Rep. Jim Langevin and U.S. Sen. Lincoln Chafee have no clout to stop the closings so they've chosen to keep silent. The jobs will go the Naval Surface Warfare Center at Dahlgren, Va., where ranking Virginia Senator John Warner wants the installations to be re-located. The town of Dahlgren, 23 miles from Fredericksburg, ho uses the Naval Space Command, AEGIS Training and Readiness Center, and Joint Warfare Analysis Center. Rogers says that those who live in Newport and those who follow the defense industry already know about the planned closings, which he said were released to the public last year.

Washington

Next week, my thoughts on the U.S. Holocaust Museum I visited last week in Washington. A very moving experience.

Roger Bouchard is general manager of Woonsocket radio station WNRI. His column appears every Thursday. He can be reached at RogerWNRI@prodigy.net

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WOONSOCKETCALL.com

10/31/2004

Tread carefully through the ballot**In Our View**

On the election ballot on Tuesday, Rhode Islanders will be asked to approve or reject 14 referenda and ballot questions. The questions include amending the constitution on separation of powers, whether the state should hold a constitutional convention, and borrowing another \$392 million for the most expensive list of bond requests in the state's history.

- Question 1, which involves several amendments, is intended to ensure a separation of governmental power among the three branches of state government: legislative, executive and judicial. It is primarily a reaction to legislators holding other appointed state offices at the same time, which consolidates power in fewer and fewer hands.

We can see no reason why anyone would want to give fewer and fewer people more and more power. The ballot question, in fact, does what our founding fathers wanted to do from the start: Keep the three branches of state government as separate and distinct entities to offer more checks and balances in government.

We urge voters to approve Question 1.

- Question 2 asks voters about a convention to further suggest amendments to the constitution. If voters approve the question, we will be asked to elect 75 delegates, one for each General Assembly House district, to consider changes to the constitution. Any changes proposed must still go before voters for final approval.

Many people are anxious about asking delegates who will serve for a short time without any real accountability to suggest revisions to the constitution. They fear, in fact, that a convention could be packed with special interest delegates or pawns of the General Assembly who could open a Pandora's box of changes, perhaps even proposing amendments on issues such as same-sex marriage and casinos in Rhode Island.

Reform groups like Operation Clean Government (OCG) and Common Cause and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) can't seem to agree on a constitutional convention. OCG sees no harm in a convention. Common Cause believes that "working the system" is a better method for making changes, like the separation of powers amendment that came out of the legislature. The ACLU sees a convention as potentially eroding more of our civil rights. Then there is the cost of a convention itself -- estimated at \$2 million by the preparatory commission that was convened to come up with such a figure.

We harbor some of the same fears about a constitutional convention, and we don't think taxpayers really want to ante up \$2 million for a conclave that could potentially offer up as many harmful changes as well-founded proposals. But we also don't want to give into fear and the unknown.

In the final analysis, we must trust the voters to elect delegates who are true representatives of the people and to reject constitutional amendments that in any way limit the civil rights of all Rhode Islanders.

The fears of opponents are real, we believe. Nonetheless, we cannot find fault with a mechanism that promises to open up the government process, in a most fundamental way, to the average citizen. We believe that the wisdom of Rhode Island voters cannot be overlooked.

11/1/2004

A constitutional convention could create a state government that better serves us all.

We urge Rhode Islanders to approve Question 2.

- Questions 3 through 14 ask voters to float bonds for projects that run the gamut from highway, bridge and road repairs; to building more college facilities; to protecting our open space and watersheds; to rehabilitating state buildings; to continuing the conversion of Quonset Point/Davisville into a economic development mecca over the long term.

There is much to be said about the value of each project. Who doesn't want better roads, bridges, and higher education facilities? Who doesn't want to protect our dwindling open spaces and our water supplies? Who doesn't want more economic development, which could eventually translate into more jobs, in Rhode Island?

At the same time, Rhode Island has made much progress in managing its debt over the past 15 years. So even with the cost of the proposed bonds, \$392 million in principal but \$620 million with interest over 20 years at 5 percent per year, tax-supported debt will remain within guidelines adopted by the Rhode Island Public Finance Management Board.

It is the cost of these projects, however, especially the borrowing of the money for these projects, that remains a significant red flag.

Data comparing Rhode Island to other states shows that our per capita cost for debt ranks the state as ninth highest in the nation, according to the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC). And RIPEC says debt in relation to personal income ranks 12th highest in the country. Our financial rankings exist at the same time that more and more people go without health insurance and pay higher and higher prices every day for things as basic as food, gasoline and heating oil.

Given the cost, we urge Rhode Islanders to do the following: Approve projects that provide immediate return on investment during a treacherous economic climate or cover debt service through increased fees, such as student fees for a new residence hall at Rhode Island College. Reject those that could be done on a pay-as-you-go basis with operating revenue, increased fees or, ideally, private funds and grants, all of which would bear no onerous interest rates.

We suggest approving Question 3 (Transportation), Question 4 (Career and Technical Schools), Question 5 (Residence Halls), Question 7 (Emergency Water Interconnects), Question 8 (Open Space and Watershed Protection) and Question 11 (Historic Preservation), and rejecting the rest of the ballot questions at this time.

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WARWICK

10/28/2004

16 questions & lots of money

One has to wonder what state authorities were thinking when they decided to list 14 referenda questions on the Nov. 2 ballot. Had they planned for people to be in the voting booth for an eternity? Had they thought by listing so many items that voters would grow weary and eventually give up? Had they believed with a total of \$392 million in bonds that people, already numbed by the ever-growing national deficit, would simply say what's a few more million and vote yes? Or perhaps they thought that those writing editorials would just not find the space to comment on every one of the questions.

If the latter was any part of the consideration, it's close to being the case. For, in addition to the state questions on the ballot, Warwick voters are being for their opinions on two local issues – a \$2 million bond referendum for open space and for their non binding opinion as to whether the city should have the final say on the expansion of Green Airport.

Let's start with the state questions and attempt the near impossible of providing an outline of the issue and an opinion without consuming a full a page of type that hopefully will give you a place from which to start. First, even though we mentioned the aggregate amount of the bond referenda, we don't suggest that voters, fearing of the expense of such borrowing, reject any or all of the 12 monetary issues on the basis of cost. They would do better to weigh the measures on their merits and whether, over the time these sums are to be paid off, they are worthy investments.

Question 1: After nearly four years of debate and much revision the voters will have the opportunity to decide on an amendment to the constitution that will do away with the appointment of Senators and Representatives to government boards and commissions. Dubbed, "separation of powers," we endorse the amendment, but believe if it is to pass much work needs to be done. The appointment of legislators on boards and commissions that in many instances are dependent on the legislature for funds has been cast as a conflict of interests and a dilution of the governor's powers. Nonetheless, their involvement has provided a valuable conduit for the flow of information. Boards have a better feel for the viability of their budget requests and the legislature has a better understanding of the challenges and work of the board. This is the positive side to the involvement of lawmakers and somehow, if legislators are not to serve on boards, then boards and commissions will need to work harder to educate them.

Question 2: Under state law voters must be asked at least every 10 years whether there should be a constitutional convention. This is the year voters get to make that decision. Although any change a convention recommends to the constitution would require voter approval, giving the people a safeguard, there are those who argue a convention would cost about \$2 million and open the door to mischief. They say the legislature is a better place to draft changes, which also requires voter approval. Their example is Question 1. As cumbersome and sometimes as off track as a convention can become, we feel it is a mechanism that involves people in government. As has been proven, the outcome is more than ideas and revisions, but also people with an interest in public service. Both are healthy. We say "yes" to No. 2.

Question 3: No bones about it, many of the state's road and bridges are in tough shape. Just drive Airport Road and the bumps and ruts speak for themselves. This question seeks voter approval to borrow \$66.52 million for

11/1/2004

road and bridgework, the repair and replacement of transportation maintenance facilities and additions to RIPTA's bus fleet. Those are reasons enough to approve Question 3. What makes its approval all the more critical is that the money will make the state eligible to receive \$378 million in federal funds. Vote for this one.

Question 4: Have you visited the career and technical center recently? You don't need to be an engineer to see that the building is in need of repairs. Those conditions are not unique; centers across the state are in similar states of deterioration. The state had wanted to give the schools to the municipalities in which they are located, but the cities and towns said no thanks until they are put back in shape. This \$15 million bond would do that – \$1.3 million for the Cranston center and \$978,000 for Warwick's. As we see it, the question is should the state borrow the money to do this or somehow take it from operating funds? Our feeling is that the state has put this off too long and budgeting repairs, if that really happens, will prolong the process. Let's approve the bond and get the work done.

Question 5: We're perplexed by the Board of Governors for Higher Education's request for \$50 million to build and renovate dorms at RIC and URI. We have no problem with the projects; they're needed and it has been shown improved on-campus living facilities bring positive results to the institutions and their students. It's the source of funding that troubles us. The board acknowledges that revenue derived from housing fees will provide a substantial reimbursement to the state. That's fine, but if revenues can pay for much of the improvements then the board need not borrow as much from the state. We favor that route and believe by borrowing from the state, the board opens the door for the state to lay claim to fees and tuition revenues, and that we don't need.

Question 6: This bond for \$12.3 million to restore and renovate the Cranston Street Armory falls under the category of spending money to save money. At least that is what the governor's fiscal fitness task force saw in the armory. With the work done the reasoning is that the space will be used for offices and storage, thereby reducing the state reliance on leased space. It makes sense – vote yes.

Question 7: We need only to think back to the rupture of the Cranston aqueduct to realize how important interconnections between water systems can be. At that time, Warwick came within hours of losing all service, a situation that was averted when water was diverted to the system from a valve in the Lakewood area and from the Kent County Water Authority. Infrastructure improvements to the system have been made since then. This referendum would provide \$5 million in matching grants for water suppliers to develop interconnections and another \$5 million to complete the Shad Factory Pipeline to preserve water rights to two Massachusetts reservoirs. This is good insurance to assure delivery of a resource that is too easily taken for granted. Vote yes.

Question 8: Now here's a whopper – \$70 million. This money would be used for a variety of projects under the categories of Narragansett Bay and watershed restoration, open space acquisition and recreational development and the acquisition of land for the protection of public drinking water supplies. While indeed a lot of money, this is a sound investment in the quality of life in this state. We especially favor the use of \$10.5 million by the Rhode Island Clean Water Finance Agency to provide low interest loans to cities and towns to improve wastewater facilities so important to the removal of nitrogen and the adverse impact it has on the bay.

Question 9: The undersea exploration center being proposed at the Pell Marine Science Library at the University of Rhode Island has been compared to the ocean equivalent of the NASA Space Center. The center, via satellite, would have a real time connection with research vessels in different parts of the world enabling scientists and students here to virtually participate in underwater exploration projects. The \$14 million to fund the center would also be used to renovate the library that serves as the resource center for URI's Graduate School of Oceanography. We see the improvements and the addition of the center as an important component to the infrastructure of the campus and to establishing the graduate school as a leader in oceanographic research. Associated benefits include the attraction of top researchers like Robert Ballard, who is already at the school, and related private sector companies.

Question 10: URI President Robert Carothers argues that for the university to be the preferred choice of young people – important because URI's ability to draw those with intellectual capital is vital to the culture of the institution – it must offer an array of amenities. Athletic facilities are among these and the Board of Governors for Higher Education is asking voters approve \$6.7 million to renovate facilities at Meade Stadium and Keaney Gym. We think that's nice, but not essential. This can wait, whereas we think Questions 9 and 13, which also support URI, cannot.

Question 11: Saving our past is as important as investing in the future. This is an argument of those in favor of granting \$3 million to preserve and renovate historic sites and buildings. Among those structures that will benefit if the bond is approved is the former Knight estate, tucked in a corner of the Community College of Rhode Island

campus on East Avenue. A water tower and outbuildings there are also in need of repair. Grants would be administered by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission and limited to public and nonprofit groups. We can't argue against preservation, but in view of the overall proposed borrowing package we think this can be accomplished through other means, whether it is nonprofit groups or foundations. We vote no on this one.

Question 12: Here again is a referendum with the purported intent of saving money by spending money. The state is seeking approval of \$46.5 million for the rehabilitation of eight buildings at the Pastore Center in Cranston so as to reduce the reliance on leased space. Without getting into the questions of how we got here, why weren't the buildings properly maintained and who's got the leases and for how long, we favor the concept of owning instead of leasing. It should save money. That said, we favor passage of this referendum and some more scrutiny into the upkeep of state offices and state leases.

Question 13: You're almost at the end of the state referenda and here's this question for \$50 million for construction of a Biotechnology and Life Sciences Center at URI. If you are feeling you have already agreed to borrow more than you think prudent, think again. The biotechnology center offers the state a unique opportunity to establish a reputation as a leader in a field like oceanography, where it attracts the brightest minds and spawns new businesses. This is a yes in our book.

Question 14: Just because this is last on the ballot is no reason to give \$48 million for improvements at Quonset short shrift. Proponents of this bond that would demolish deteriorating buildings, upgrade rail lines so that the commercial park could take full advantage of the freight rail connection or third rail project now under construction, make badly needed seawall repairs and lay the groundwork for new construction say it is the only bond issue that will pay off directly to the state. The reasoning is that the overall state investments at Quonset, including the \$48 million bond, will amount to \$77,000 per acre. That land will sell for \$125,000 per acre at today's prices, giving the state a return of \$48,000 per acre. The longtime payoff is put in terms of the added jobs the commercial development will mean for Rhode Islanders. We can't find fault with the premise that Quonset offers tremendous potential and that the sums invested can bring great returns. What's needed now are private sector investors. Our vote is "yes," although we add an admonition to EDC director Michael McMahon not to expect because it is there they will come. We need a comprehensive marketing campaign and perhaps some legislation as enticement to make this work.

Westerly Sun 10/26/04

CONSTITUTIONAL MOVE DESERVES SUPPORT FROM R.I. VOTERS

Once every 10 years, Rhode Island residents get the chance to open their state constitution, see if it needs to be updated, propose specific changes, and then ask the state's voters whether they want to approve any amendments.

In 1994, Rhode Island's voters turned down that opportunity, essentially deciding the General Assembly was better qualified to consider any constitutional changes. They were wrong - and voters should not pass up that opportunity again.

By voting "yes" for Question 2 on the Rhode Island referendum ballot next week, voters are not making specific changes in the state's primary governmental document. They are merely opening the constitution for a fresh look. They are calling for a convention of citizen delegates who can take power usually reserved for lawmakers and, over a year, debate potential changes and bring them forward for referendum. That's a good idea - and it's an essential part of the democracy.

The notion of changing the constitution surfaced in the Assembly override session in July, when Democratic senators considered rushing through changes to clear the way for a clearly unconstitutional referendum on casino gambling.

That action alone should have shown voters the need to vote for a constitutional convention. Yet many seem to have concerns. H. Philip West, the Common Cause-Rhode Island director who has fought for a decade for "separation of powers" amendment noted below, opposes a constitutional convention. He fears the Assembly will usurp control, find a way to push through its own agenda, and undo the "separation" resolution and other citizen initiatives. And he knows of what he speaks; while voters select the convention delegates, some past

constitutional conventions have been stacked with Assembly members' cronies. We're not that cynical.

Voters should be aware that reopening the constitution means opening the entire document for review. That could bring up potential changes in gambling provisions, amendments supporting or opposing gay marriage and a host of other issues. But it is also essential for raising issues such as voting rights for non-resident property taxpayers in financial referendums, petitioning rights for referendum initiatives, and many other issues that are at least worth debate and a long, hard look.

The Rhode Island Constitution - like other such documents from the U.S. Constitution to our local town charters - has held up well to many tests over the years. And it continues to serve us well today. But it is not meant to be left on the shelf, dusted off only when some crisis arises. And it is certainly not meant to be the sole purview of lawmakers, governors and our judicial system. It is a living, breathing document - meant to be taken off the shelf and re-examined by a panel of citizens who deserved to have legitimate input into wording.

It's time to take it off the shelf. Vote "yes" for a constitutional convention; vote "yes" on Question 2.

Westerly Sun Editorial, October 25, 2004 ??

Main Identity

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**Vote yes on Question 2**

01:00 AM EDT on Monday, October 25, 2004

On the Nov. 2 ballot, Rhode Islanders will be asked to decide on Question 2: whether the state should hold a constitutional convention. If they vote yes, citizens around the state will run next year for 75 positions (one for each House district) and, if elected, will meet to consider changing the state constitution. Any changes that they propose will then go before the voters for final approval.

Even with such checks built into the process, some people are nervous about any rewriting of the constitution outside the State House.

They fear that a constitutional convention would be packed with the State House leaders' minions -- as in the last convention, in 1986 -- so that the process would serve the special interests controlling the General Assembly, rather than the public good.

They worry about a runaway train discarding worthy parts of the constitution and going off the tracks by bickering over such social issues as same-sex marriage and abortion rights.

They fear that the public would be unable to keep a close watch on both the General Assembly and the convention, which would be meeting at the same time. As citizens should know well by now, when no one watches politicians bad things can happen.

Those skilled at lobbying legislators -- from Philip West, of Common Cause, to public-employee unions, who oppose this measure -- believe that they can better accomplish their agendas by "working the system," rather than opening the Pandora's box of a constitutional convention.

Some have argued that a convention, at an estimated \$2 million, would cost too much -- that reforms could be achieved by cheaper means.

We say to all: Let the citizens convene, discuss, and create a better Rhode Island. It would be well worth the effort and the money.

It would also be much harder than in 1987 for legislative leaders to pack a convention. Today, an aroused citizenry clamors for change in Rhode Island, and such citizen groups as Operation Clean Government are aggressively working to see that the public gets a fair shake. OCG, indeed, might run a statewide slate of reform candidates for a constitutional convention.

The argument that constitutional changes are better made through the legislature holds little water. Intelligent citizens who wish to serve at a convention but then get out of politics could probably do a better job of reforming Rhode Island than politicians who feel they must kow-tow to campaign contributors and public-employee unions.

A convention of intelligent citizens could do much to limit political corruption and build faith in government. It could:

Institute a line-item veto for the governor.

10/25/2004

Create an inspector general.

Rework the judicial-nomination process to give greater weight to merit.

Impose greater checks and balances, so that information would be made public and the power of insiders would be reduced.

Set term limits on the speaker of the House. The merits of legislation, rather than the muscle of the leader, would thus be more likely to influence the members' voting.

We should not let fears conquer the hope of creating a government that better serves the public. We urge Rhode Islanders to vote yes on Question 2.

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EDITORIAL

State ballot referenda: Questions 1 and 2 deserve 'yes' vote

Last week, we outlined our endorsement process and the candidates we support for various local, state and federal offices.

But when voters are done marking their choices for president and vice president, Congress, state legislature, local councils and school boards on Tuesday, they will be far from finished.

Flip the ballot over, and there will be 14 statewide questions. We hope voters will not be intimidated by the large number of questions, because there are some important issues to be decided.

We believe the first two questions are the most vital.

Question 1, if approved, would amend the state constitution to better balance power among the branches of government by specifying that it "shall be distributed into three separate and distinct departments: the legislative, the executive and the judicial." Although we all learned in American history class that our government is based on those separate but equal branches, which allow for a healthy system of checks and balances, Rhode Island government was not created that way. In Rhode Island's form of government, the legislative branch has an inordinate amount of power.

Voters twice have overwhelmingly approved nonbinding referenda supporting the concept, dubbed "separation of powers." But it won't become a reality until they approve Question 1 - which we hope they do in record numbers - and set the wheels of change in motion.

Question 2 asks voters whether the state should hold a constitutional convention. The question is required to appear on the ballot every 10 years, but considering the atmosphere of government reform that has taken hold on the state, we can't imagine a better time to do so.

Much like a charter review committee on the municipal level, a constitutional convention allows the public to participate in a review of the state's constitution, its primary guiding document. One delegate from each of the state's 75 House of Representatives districts would be elected to serve on the convention, to take up such potential issues as voter initiative, the role of the lieutenant governor, increasing the percentage necessary for a veto override and/or establishing a line-item budget veto for the governor. Any recommendations made by the constitutional convention would go directly to the ballot for a statewide vote, without intervention by the General Assembly.

It's ironic that opponents of a constitutional convention - some of them who worked more than a decade to finally get separation of powers on the ballot, and that only happened after a scandal involving the House speaker - would argue that it would be better for constitutional amendments to go through the General Assembly. That's the same General Assembly that was going to try to push through a proposal to change the constitution to allow a privately owned casino in Rhode Island at the end of the last session, with no debate of the issue. Fortunately, that didn't happen, but those are the kinds of shenanigans that can be easily imagined if changing the constitution is left solely to the legislature. However, one cannot easily - or ever - imagine a line-item veto for the governor coming out of the General Assembly.

Further, opponents claim that it would be "too much" for the public to handle the implementation of separation of powers - a complicated process, to be sure - and a constitutional convention at the same time. We find this insulting to the good people of Rhode Island, who have stated in no uncertain terms that the time for reform has come, and who deserve to be part of the process. We urge residents to vote "yes" on Question 2.

The remaining 12 questions offer a variety of bond issues for a whopping total of \$392 million. In these economic times, we doubt all 12 will be approved. In fact, we agree with the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, which analyzed the bond proposals in terms of their effect on the state's indebtedness, and recommended voters prioritize proposals that would help the state's economy and job creation and those whose benefits clearly outweigh the costs of the project.

In that light, we wholeheartedly support passage of one bond - Question 8 - and advise voters to consider several others.

Question 8 asks voters to approve a \$70 million bond issue for open space, recreation and bay and watershed protection. Much of the \$25 million for open space and \$18 million for recreation projects would be used to match funding raised by local communities and nonprofit agencies, such as the Aquidneck Land Trust that are working to preserve and improve what's left of our natural resources. It is important to note that \$3 million to support renovations at Fort Adams in Newport is included in the recreation funding.

Just as importantly, the bond proposal provides \$19 million for watershed protection, including \$10.5 million for a revolving loan fund that municipalities can tap into to make much-needed (and often expensive) repairs and improvements to wastewater treatment plants. Such projects would help reduce the number of beach closures from sewage contamination. We urge voters to approve Question 8.

Of the four higher education bond issues on the ballot, we hope voters will consider Question 12, which would allocate \$50 million to create a biotechnology center at the University of Rhode Island. With companies like Amgen in Rhode Island, it makes sense for the state to be on the cutting edge of this trend. The center would help educate and prepare people for jobs, the number of which likely is to grow with such a strong commitment.

Questions 3, 4 and 11 may have local benefit. Question 3, a \$66.5 million transportation bond, would "likely" include money for restoration of the Cliff Walk in Newport and expansion of the state highway facility in Portsmouth, DOT officials say - although no projects are specified in the question and there is no guarantee that will actually happen. Question 4, requesting \$15 million for regional vocation and technical high schools, would include \$1.76 million for much-needed repairs at the Newport Area Career and Technical Center. Question 11 would provide \$3 million for historic preservation, which certainly could apply to many local organizations.

We trust voters will use their best judgment on what is most important for the state - and what they can afford.

- Nov. 1, 2004

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