

Constitutional convention up to voters

Interest groups lining up to oppose issue for fear of changes

Monday, April 28, 2008

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OF GATEHOUSE NEWS SERVICE

One issue affecting the state Constitution will be on the ballot in November, even though the General Assembly had nothing to do with putting it there.

Voters will be asked if they want to hold another constitutional convention. The current constitution requires that the question of a constitutional convention be put to the voters at least once every 20 years.

The last time a con-con plan was on the ballot was in 1988. Only about 25 percent of the people who voted on it said "yes." The issue needs a 60 percent "yes" vote for a convention to be held.

Twenty years ago, a number of powerful interest groups lined up against the idea, and they are doing so again this year. Both the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association oppose a convention out of skepticism that a constitutional convention will solve the state's perennial problems with school funding and because of concern that a provision in the current constitution that guarantees pension payments to retired teachers could be repealed.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees hasn't taken a formal position, but has "serious reservations" about the idea, said spokesman Anders Lindall.

The Illinois Chamber of Commerce is opposed, in part because a convention could open the door to much higher corporate income taxes, which are now limited by the constitution. Todd Maisch, vice president of government affairs for the Chamber, said the organization also fears a convention could be used to promote "very radical" ideas on health care and to bring a California-style referendum system to Illinois.

All of these groups are expected to mount public relations campaigns against the idea of a convention.

Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, a proponent of a convention, believes a convention could spur progress on issues like school funding reform, property tax reform, and ethics changes.

Any changes to the constitution recommended by the convention delegates still must be approved by voters.

"When you look at the reasons for opposition, it comes down to fear-mongering," Fritchey said. "What these groups are most concerned about is they would not have the same influence with the general public that they have with the status quo in the Capitol today."

Kent Redfield, political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said he'd be surprised if the convention issue passes in November because the "status quo coalition" against it is so large.

"Anybody who feels like not much good can happen and a lot of bad can happen will be opposed," Redfield said.

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