

A Makeover Every 20 Years

New Year's resolutions are easy to make...hard to keep. For Florida, how about a complete makeover of the State Constitution? Now, that one seems harder than those ten pounds we may all want to shed, yet that is what the 2017-2018 Constitution Revision Commission (CRC) must resolve to do.

Required by the Constitution every 20 years, this Commission is about to be formed again, and 37 to-be-appointed members will soon embark on a flurry of activity that will result in constitutional amendments for us to vote on on the November 2018 ballot.

There are no limits on what can be added to or subtracted from the current Constitution. We may see proposals as far reaching as:

- Tax-funded vouchers to send students to private schools
- Term limits for judges
- Restoration of an independently-elected Secretary of State and Education Commissioner to the Florida Cabinet
- Abolition of capital punishment
- Election reform
- Automatic rights restoration for former felons
- Changes in environmental protection

The possibilities are endless.

For the first time in its history, Republicans will make all 37 Commission appointments. As provided in the Constitution:

The Governor makes 15,

The House Speaker and Senate President each make 9,

The State Supreme Court Chief Justice makes 3, and

The Attorney General is automatically a member.

Ideally, membership of the Commission would reflect the geographic, racial, gender and political diversity of the state. Unfortunately, Speaker Richard Corcoran has said that his litmus test is that commission members be "conservative" with a bedrock belief in individual liberties and responsibilities. President Negrón has made similar statements.

The good news is that, unlike changes proposed by prior Commissions, amendments now need 60% voter approval to pass, increased from 50% by a 2006 voter-approved amendment.

We citizens have a responsibility to monitor the selection of Commission members and their activities. Once the Commission is named, the public should be actively engaged in presenting ideas for its consideration. In 1978 and 1998 the CRC held a series of hearings across the state to get public input and reaction to proposed amendments. We hope this Commission will continue that process. After a

year of work, these amendments go directly to the ballot...no legislative or gubernatorial approval is needed.

Any initiative that has already passed the muster of Florida's judiciary and over 60 percent of the voters should be left untouched. For example, the Fair Districts Amendments passed overwhelmingly by the voters in 2010 made many incumbent legislators work harder this election cycle to get re-elected. They also brought forth many new candidates and higher discourse of issues. That's exactly what the people wanted and they got it. But Negron and Corcoran have said those amendments are flawed and should be rewritten by the CRC.

We are hopeful that this commission will enable new forward thought, not devise ways to reverse the will of the citizens that have already spoken to what they want in their Constitution.

A bit of history on this 20-year makeover....

In 1978, eight amendments were put forth by that year's CRC. Among them was a complete abolition of the six member Florida Cabinet. Those Cabinet members and their backers from agriculture, education, banking and other special interests did not take kindly to this dissolution of their jobs and power. They fought against all the amendments. Then-Governor Reuben Askew did not support any of the CRC amendments either. They all went down in flames at the ballot box.

The 1998 CRC did better. Only one out of nine proposed amendments, an obscure local tax exemption, failed. The most far-reaching change reduced the Florida Cabinet from six to three members, removing the Secretary of State and Secretary of Education and merging the offices of Treasurer and Comptroller. Other amendments passed addressed conservation, judicial selection, firearms purchases and election processes.

The League of Women Voters of Florida has partnered with The Collins Institute, The Florida Bar, The Florida Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Florida, NAACP and others in a special project to inform voters about the CRC and the amendments (<http://www.revisefl.com>).

The Constitution Revision Commission of 2017-2018 should provide a pathway for the public's input into the constitutional review process. An opportunity to be engaged, have open discourse and be informed in the process of making laws that will move our state forward in the areas of election reform, education, environment and social issues for the protection and betterment of our citizens.

Let's use this New Year's resolution wisely.