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Vote coming on tax bills for seniors and disabled

Amendment seeks to complete work on property tax cuts.

By Jason Embry
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Property tax bills for senior citizens and disabled Texans will decrease statewide if voters approve an amendment to the Constitution on Saturday's ballot.

The amendment asks whether voters want to reduce the limit on school property taxes for homeowners who are 65 and older or who receive federal disability payments. If it is passed, those homeowners will see a one-third reduction in the cap on the school property taxes they pay on their homesteads.

Other owners of homes and businesses already have won a one-third cut in their school property tax rates from the Legislature, although most of that cut won't take effect until later this year. But school tax payments for seniors and people with disabilities are capped by a provision in the Constitution, so it takes a change to the Constitution to give them a proportional reduction, and that requires a vote of the public.

The constitutional ceiling is designed to prevent people who do not have growing incomes from being taxed out of their homes as their appraisals and tax rates go up.

Texans usually vote on constitutional amendments in November, but lawmakers scheduled this referendum for May so seniors' taxes would go down when the bulk of the tax cut takes effect for everyone else this year. Most of them already missed out on the first round of tax cuts because lawmakers could not schedule a vote before current tax rates were set.

Property owners who do not benefit from the amendment are likely to see their tax payments inch back up as appraisals increase and as local school boards and voters raise tax rates.

"On the one hand, you're bringing down taxes that have already been frozen for a long time, and their rate won't ever go back up, while everybody else's rates who got brought down can go back up," said Byron Schlomach of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which calls for less government spending. "But on the other hand, is it really fair to leave some people out of the property tax relief?"

The state would replace the money school districts would lose from the seniors' tax cut, which is estimated to cost about \$775 million over five years.


The measure setting Saturday's vote sailed through the Capitol about as easily as any piece of legislation could.

"We support the amendment despite the fact that the over-65 freeze really doesn't relate to your ability to pay," said Dick Lavine of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, which supports more spending on programs aiming to help low-income Texans.

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