

The Baytown Sun

Statewide prop would give seniors a tax break

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Though most Baytown seniors already have their property taxes capped at their current levels, that doesn't diminish their support for a statewide proposal to reduce property taxes for senior citizens across the state, and city council members agree with their position.

Texas Proposition 1 — not to be confused with the City of Baytown's Proposition 1, which would re-instate the old smoking ordinance — will be on Saturday's ballot. If it is approved, seniors across the state will have their property taxes reduced, "correcting" an oversight in the 2006 property tax reforms passed by the state legislature that did not apply to fixed income seniors.

Proposition 1 would reduce property taxes for seniors and disabled citizens in the same way as other property owners saw their taxes decrease after the 2006 reform. Most seniors in the state already have their taxes frozen, but the state now wants to reduce their taxes to allow them to benefit from the 2006 cuts.

The reason the vote is now before the citizens, rather than the legislature, is because such a reduction requires a change in the Texas constitution. If approved by the voters, the amendment would expire Jan. 1 2009, so an additional amendment would be required for the cuts to continue after the 2007 tax year.

All members of Baytown's city council said they have voted or will vote in favor of the proposition, despite its potential cost to the state. Mayor Stephen DonCarlos also supports the bill.

"I think it's just fair," DonCarlos said. "When the state overlooked them in the property tax relief package last year, that was a real problem. Now we're just correcting that problem. But I definitely support it."

The state has not yet calculated the potential cost of such legislation, but Austin lawmakers and Gov. Rick Perry have continued to stress that it is simply a part of last year's legislation, which the legislature already approved.

The proposal, which also applies to disabled citizens, would take effect beginning in fiscal year 2007-08.

District 4 Councilman Don Murray, a senior citizen, said wealthy seniors should vote for the proposition on behalf of those who are dependent on fixed income, whether Social Security or a small pension plan.

“Personally I don’t have as much financial constraint, but a majority of seniors are on a fixed income that does not go up as fast as property taxes,” Murray said. “They paid their dues when they were younger and helped build the systems that are in place now, and to put them in this spot is inappropriate and unfair.”

But not everyone across the state agrees with the proposal. Many have said that the “oversight” in 2006 was logical, given that many areas, like Baytown, have frozen property taxes for the target populations.

“The more recently frozen properties might see some relief,” said Byron Schlomach of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. “But some that have been frozen for 10 years or more might not see any simply because their amounts have been frozen. They have been paying so much less than they would otherwise that even with the tax cut it would not have gotten down to what they are paying now.”

Early voting for Baytonians in Harris County is available from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. today and Tuesday at Remington Park Assisted Living, 901 W. Baker Road. Chambers County voters living in Baytown can vote at the same times at the Chambers County Cedar Bayou Annex, 7711 Highway 146. After Tuesday, voters must wait until Election Day on Saturday.

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