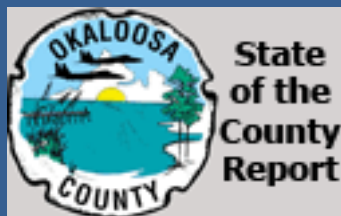


*A force for progress on the Emerald Coast since 1962!*

May / June 2018

"The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally"

*Flannery O'Connor  
American Author*



### 19<sup>th</sup> Annual State of the County Report

This year's SOTC is scheduled from 10:00–noon on Saturday, 9 June, at the FWB CoC (34 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE). Watch the League website for details



### Separate Fact from Fiction

Ever wonder if that headline or item in your Facebook feed is accurate? It's hard to tell in the digital age, so it's our responsibility to **not** always take headlines and viral memes at face value. Use Vote Smart's Voter Self-Defense (<https://tinyurl.com/y82bcp9x>) System to fact check, or call the 1-888-VoteSmart hotline. Don't be misled again!



### League's Mission:

*The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.*

## 2018 AMENDMENTS ISSUE, VOL 1

There are four ways to get a proposed amendment to the Florida Constitution onto the ballot: legislative referral; citizens' initiative; and referral by the Taxation & Budget Reform Commission or the Constitution Revision Commission (CRC). The two commissions each meet once every 20 years at 10-year intervals, and this year it's the CRC's turn. As a result, Florida voters must decide on **13 proposed amendments** on the 2018 General Election ballot.

And there's another wrinkle. While citizen initiatives and legislatively-referred measures are restricted to a single

issue, must be written in clear language subject Florida Supreme Court approval and must include the estimated cost to Florida taxpayers if approved, referrals from the CRC need not pass any of those tests.

In coming months you'll likely see ads and editorials both for and against all the proposed amendments, and you'll have to sort all that information out before you vote. To help you make informed decisions, League will devote the next three issues of the Voter to explaining the various amendments and their ramifications.

### **AMENDMENT 1, HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION** (legislatively referred)

This amendment would provide a homestead exemption on the portion of home values between \$100,000 and \$125,000, meaning the \$25,000 between \$100,000 and \$125,000 of a home's value would be exempted from property taxes other than school district taxes. Currently the first \$25,000 of a home's value is exempt from property taxes, as is the value between \$50–75,000. Amendment 1 would exempt the value between \$100–125,000. If approved, the homestead exemption for a home valued at \$200,000 would be \$75,000. If rejected, the homestead exemption for a home valued at \$200,000 would remain at \$50,000.

Florida's Constitution reserves the power to levy property taxes for local governments—such as counties, cities, school districts, and certain special districts—so Amendment 1 would adversely impact the revenue of local governments, and that's not all.

In FY2016–17 the general revenue fund provided \$23,881,616 to Florida's 29 fiscally constrained counties —i.e., rural

counties and counties where a one mil levy would raise not more than \$5 million annually. These counties are essentially reimbursed by the state government to offset decreases in revenue caused by certain homestead exemptions. The state legislature is specifically required to reimburse fiscally-constrained counties for any decreases in property taxes caused by the passage of Amendment 1, and the state's own fiscal analysis estimates that will cost an *extra* ~\$10.5 million annually—a **44% increase!**

Florida taxpayers will be on the hook for this. Since  $\frac{3}{4}$  of general revenue comes from sales tax, you see where this is heading. Additionally, education and human services (which comprise the majority of general revenue expenses) typically bear the brunt of budget cuts when there is a shortfall.

So, are you ready to accept fewer local services and/or higher sales taxes? You must answer that question before you decide whether or not to support Amendment 1.

### **AMENDMENT 2, PERMANENT CAP ON NON-HOMESTEAD PARCEL ASSESSMENT INCREASES** (legislatively referred)

Amendment 2 would make permanent the 10% cap on annual non-homestead parcel assessment increases set to expire on 1 Jan 2019. The cap doesn't apply to school district taxes. It covers

non-homestead residential properties, such as second homes and rental apartments, and nonresidential property, such as commercial property and vacant land. (continued on page 2)

**AMENDMENT 2** (cont'd)

Florida Realtors are the biggest proponents of this measure, and they are actively campaigning for its passage (<https://tinyurl.com/y8xs3lhm>). Small business is the backbone of Florida's economy, and they claim this amendment helps residents **and** businesses by protecting them from excessive spikes in property taxes. This in turn helps communities thrive by promoting eco-

**AMENDMENT 3, CASINO GAMBLING** (citizens' initiative)

This amendment would make the citizen initiative process "the exclusive method of authorizing casino gambling." The legislature would not be allowed to authorize casino gambling either through statute or by referring an amendment. The measure's definition of casino gambling **includes** card games, casino games, and slot machines and **excludes** pari-mutuel wagering on horse racing, dog racing, or jai alai exhibitions. It would not impact casino gambling on Native American tribal lands now established through state-tribe compacts.

This measure is supported by Disney and the Seminole Tribe, neither of which want more competition for entertainment and gambling dollars. To get on the ballot in Florida, a citizen's initiative requires enough signatures from registered voters to equal to 8% of the votes cast in the preceding presidential election (currently ~754,000). Signatures must also be collected from at least 8% of the district-wide vote in at

**AMENDMENT 4, FELON RIGHTS RESTORATION** (citizens' initiative)

Amendment 4 would automatically restore voting rights to people with felony convictions—except those convicted of murder or a felony sexual offense—upon completion of their sentences (prison+parole+probation).

Florida is 1 of only 4 states where convicted felons do not regain voting rights until and unless a state officer or board restores them. Under Governor Scott convicted felons must wait 5 or 7 years (depending on the offense) after completing their sentences to request the board consider restoration of their voting and other civil rights. On 1 Feb 2018, the US District Court of Northern Florida ruled that the state's current process is unconstitutional, because it violates the 1<sup>st</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments.

conomic opportunity, protecting renters from rent increases and ensuring Florida remains an affordable place to live, work and do business.

Voters approved the original 10-year/10% cap in a 2008 amendment, and the push to make it permanent received strong bipartisan support in the legislature in 2018. So far there is no opposition on record.

least 14 of the state's 27 congressional districts (currently ~8,200 in Okaloosa and ~1,100 in Walton Counties). So, if Amendment 3 is approved by voters, the bar to approve additional casino gambling in the state will be high.

Amendment supporters insist that due to the high stakes involved and the money that the gambling industry could potentially pour into campaigns and lobbying, the people of Florida should have the final say on whether or not to legalize casino-style gambling.

Currently card games, casino games, and slot machines are prohibited at non-tribal facilities in all but Miami-Dade and Broward Counties, and the Seminole Tribe has the exclusive right to operate blackjack in Florida. As a result, Amendment 3 opponents claim it would essentially make gaming a monopoly for the Seminole Tribe. Additionally, owners of pari-mutuel businesses would prefer to be regulated by the statute, not amendment.

Supporters, led by "Floridians for a Fair Democracy," note that nearly 1.5 million people in Florida are permanently excluded from voting because of a prior non-violent felony conviction. These individuals have paid their debts to society by completing their full sentences, and thus have earned the opportunity to participate in and give back to their communities.

Opponents, led by "Floridians for a Sensible Voting Rights Policy," say automatic restoration of voting rights wrongly treats all nonviolent felonies the same, and precludes examination of the specifics of an individual crime and the post-release history of the criminal before rights restoration.

**AMENDMENT 5, TWO THIRDS VOTE OF LEGISLATURE TO INCREASE TAXES OR FEES** (legislatively referred)

Amendment 5 would require a two-thirds vote of each chamber of the Florida Legislature to enact new taxes or fees or increase existing ones. Currently the legislature needs only a simple majority in each chamber to do so—except for corporate income tax. (In 1971 voters approved an amendment requiring a three-fifths vote to increase corporate income tax above 5%.) If approved, Amendment 5 would preclude passage of a tax or fee increase along a party-line vote, unless a single party controlled 27 seats in the state Senate and 80 seats in the state House.

Governor Scott specifically requested this amendment from the Legislature, which obliged. Supporters claim the higher threshold is warranted because it should always be "much more difficult to raise taxes than it is to cut them."

Opponents claim the measure is "short-sighted," because future legislatures will lose any flexibility regarding taxes and revenues. Additionally, while future legislatures would be constrained from raising funds, there are no limits on special exemptions, which in combination only serve to make Florida's tax code more and more regressive.



Amendments 1–5 were all legislatively-referred or citizen initiatives. The next Voter will cover 4 of the 8 CRC-referred ballot measures. Start your own research at Ballotpedia (<https://tinyurl.com/ybad8f73>), and Vote Smart (<https://tinyurl.com/y96vr5zy>), which both provide nonpartisan election information. Be informed. Be prepared. **BE A VOTER!**