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POLITICS

What constitutional amendments will be on Georgians' ballots in November?

Georgia voters will be asked to authorize a 911 modernization fund, increase a property tax exemption for farmers and make probate judges nonpartisan.

By Sophia Eppley

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Georgia voters won't just decide who holds office this November. They'll also weigh in on three proposed amendments to the state constitution.

Next Generation 9-1-1 Fund

This amendment would allow the state Legislature to create the Georgia Next Generation 9-1-1 Fund. The fund would modernize the state's 911 services to keep up with today's technology, like allowing callers to send text messages, pictures and videos to emergency dispatchers.

Georgia's current 911 infrastructure has remained largely unchanged since its inception in 1968, according to the Georgia Emergency Communications Agency. Technology has significantly evolved since then, with 80% of 911 calls nationwide coming from wireless mobile devices rather than landlines tied to specific addresses.

Approval of this amendment would not immediately change the 911 fee Georgians pay on their phone bill. Future laws will decide how the fund will be managed and what money will be deposited into it. The current 911 cellphone fee is \$1.50.

A “yes” vote allows the state Legislature to create and dedicate revenue to the Georgia Next Generation 9-1-1 Fund.

A “no” vote opposes the state Legislature creating and dedicating revenue to the Georgia Next Generation 9-1-1 Fund.

Property tax amendment

This amendment would allow owners of large farms and timberland to receive a property tax break for up to 4,000 acres of land instead of the current 2,000-acre limit.

A single landowner can currently enroll a maximum of 2,000 acres to receive special property tax assessment under Georgia's Conservation Use Valuation Assessment program.

Land that qualifies under CUVA — including farming, timber production or conservation land — is currently taxed at 40% of its current use value instead of its full value. This amendment would allow more acres — 4,000 instead of 2,000 — to become eligible for that property tax break.

Supporters say the amendment will help keep family farms in business and streamline efficiency and transparency. Sen. Sam Watson, R-Moultrie, who sponsored the resolution in the state Senate, argued that the amendment is necessary to update conservation use laws that have remained largely unchanged since the 1980s when agriculture was significantly different.

There are some reservations that approving the amendment could cost local government and schools property tax revenue or that it could expand to give corporate farms an unneeded tax break.

A “yes” vote approves increasing the maximum amount of land that a single owner can enroll in CUVA from 2,000 to 4,000 acres.

A “no” vote opposes increasing the maximum amount of land that a single owner can enroll in CUVA to 4,000 acres. The existing limit of 2,000 acres would stay in place.

Nonpartisan probate judges

This amendment would require that probate judges be elected on a nonpartisan basis. Probate judges are the last judicial office in the state where candidates still run with a party label.

Probate judges administer wills and estates, appoint guardians and conservators, and issue marriage and weapons carry licenses. Some handle traffic offenses and hear misdemeanor cases.

If the amendment passes, Georgia's judiciary will be fully nonpartisan. Supporters argue that partisanship breaks the judicial code of conduct and that removing those political labels will ensure impartiality and public trust.

State Rep. Kimberly New, R-Villa Rica, sponsored the resolution in the state House and said judges should serve the law, not a political party. This amendment will protect the integrity of Georgia's courts, she said.

A "yes" vote will require that all probate judges be elected on a nonpartisan basis.

A "no" vote opposes requiring that all probate judges be elected on a nonpartisan basis. Probate judges would continue to be elected partisan.

Clarification

This story has been updated to clarify that passage of the Next Generation 9-1-1 amendment would not trigger an automatic increase in the 911 fee on Georgians' phone bills.