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ACCOUNTABILITY AND INNOVATION

by

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The pressure is on in Louisiana for more efficient local government--and the best way to achieve that is through a home rule charter approved by the voters.

The 1974 state constitution greatly expanded the opportunities for cities and parishes to become truly "home rule." Charters make them more independent of the state Legislature and more responsive to their citizens.

Charters can hold officials accountable for their actions and provide opportunities for innovation, to try new ideas. Accountability and innovation are the basis for progressive, efficient government.

Many home rule charters have been adopted in Louisiana, especially under provisions of the 1974 state constitution. Of the 28 cities with charters, 17 have been adopted since 1974. Parish charters are of an even more recent vintage. Of the 15 parishes with charters, 11 have been adopted since 1980.

Home rule charters are a product of local citizen involvement. State law provides for charter commissions of not less than seven nor more than 11 members to draft a charter. The commissions can be activated in two ways:

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1. By the local governing body which can appoint charter commission members or provide for their election.

2. By a petition signed by 10 percent, or 10,000 registered voters, whichever is less. The governing body then must call an election for the commission members.

The structure of government is the key to effective, responsible government, and a charter enables the citizens to create the structure most suitable to their city or parish government.

Charters enable citizens to hold their officials accountable through separation of administrative and policymaking functions, and adequate checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches.

Important in any charter are the "public safeguards," which are provisions authorizing citizen involvement in government, such as requiring that:

--the charter can be amended by a citizen petition requiring an election on proposed charter amendments;

--citizens can initiate a petition to require that proposed ordinances be submitted to the people for a vote;

--budgeting and spending controls be clearly spelled out;

--all council actions having the force of law be by ordinance and a public hearing held prior to passage, and

--use of "emergency" ordinances be restricted.

City and parish governments function best when local citizens exercise strong control over their operations through a home rule charter.