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Texans to vote on proposed constitutional amendments

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BY DAVE MONTGOMERY
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AUSTIN — In just over five weeks, Texans will decide on further changes to the state's much-amended constitution, including measures to create top-tier universities and toughen protections for property owners.

The Nov. 3 election has barely registered with most voters, many of whom are likely more focused on the hotly contested 2010 races for governor and the U.S. Senate. But the 11 proposed amendments nevertheless have a long reach over millions of Texans, covering a mix of constituencies from veterans to beachgoers.

In North Texas, three major universities have a big stake in the outcome of Proposition 4, which seeks to create a network of flagship universities to make Texas more competitive with states such as California and New York.

The University of Texas at Arlington, the University of North Texas in Denton and the University of Texas at Dallas are among seven so-called emerging universities that would be placed on track to become elite flagship institutions. Under the proposal, the universities would compete for money from a new National Research University Fund.

Tier 1 universities are defined as those that commit more than \$100 million to research annually. Texas has three — the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M in College Station and Rice University, a private school in Houston.

Property and taxes

Proposition 11 would place more restrictions on government entities that use eminent domain to take private property. The amendment is the latest outgrowth of the Supreme Court's 2005 decision in *Kelo v. City of New London*, a case that broadly allows the government to use eminent domain to take property for private economic purposes.

The state's 120,000 veterans, including those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, would benefit through proposals to encourage the building of more veterans hospitals in Texas and to continue a state program that provides them low-interest loans to buy land and houses.

Three amendments are collectively designed to streamline the state's tax appraisal system and eliminate



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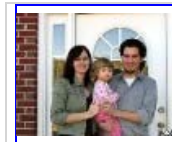
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inequities in taxing districts across the state.

Two other amendments would let cities combat residential encroachment around military bases and strengthen the state's public beaches law.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, leader of the tax watchdog group Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, said he's excited about the tax appraisal changes.

"They're pretty nerdy at first glance, but they will provide very substantive reforms to the property tax appraisal system," Sullivan said.

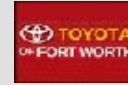
Proposition 2, which requires that a person's primary residence be appraised on its value as a homestead instead its of potential use for commercial development, would help thousands of homeowners in older residences, he said.

"This is good government stuff," Sullivan said. "We shouldn't be running granny out of her house just because someone thinks the property would make a good high-rise development or mini-mall."

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