

This year's Proposition 13 stirs no opposition

The statewide ballot measure would allow owners of all types of buildings to make earthquake safety upgrades without triggering a property tax reassessment.

Catherine Saillant, Los Angeles Times, 5-16-10

Of the five statewide ballot measures voters will take up in June, Proposition 13 is the least controversial, garnering nearly universal support and no formal opposition.

Which means, of course, that it has little in common with that other Proposition 13, the 1978 initiative that launched a property tax revolt.

This year's version would allow owners of all types of buildings to make earthquake safety upgrades without triggering a property tax reassessment.

Under current law, buildings made of unreinforced brick and concrete blocks are subject to reassessment 15 years after seismic upgrades are completed. Other types of buildings that undergo upgrades are reassessed only when they are sold. That doesn't make sense, the measure's backers say, because unreinforced masonry is the most likely to fail in an earthquake.

Proposition 13 would apply the reassessment exemption to all buildings consistently, said Tom Bordonaro, assessor for San Luis Obispo County.

Bordonaro became aware of the disparity after a 2003 earthquake in the San Luis Obispo County town of Paso Robles took down several structures in the city's core. Two women were killed by debris falling from the landmark clock tower building.

During cleanup, commercial property owners asked how their buildings' values would change after seismic updates. Bordonaro discovered that the most dangerous buildings received only a 15-year exemption.

"This would clean up existing laws and make it more practical for property owners to make the retrofits," said Bordonaro, one of Proposition 13's primary backers. "We want to give them every incentive to do the right thing."

Al McVay and his partners spent nearly \$1 million to retrofit the J.P. Andrews building, an 1892 historic landmark in San Luis Obispo, after the magnitude 6.5 Paso Robles earthquake. Because the building was made of unreinforced brick, the partners are entitled to only the current 15-year reassessment exemption.

But they would be happy to see that turn into a permanent exemption, saving them about \$10,000 a year in property taxes, McVay said.

Passage of the initiative would result in a "minor reduction" in property taxes flowing to local governments, a legislative analysis found. But many county assessors have said they don't collect the extra taxes anyway because they don't keep track of when 15-year exemptions expire, or they classify the upgrades as repairs that don't trigger reassessment.

Proposition 13's primary backers are Bordonaro, state Sen. Roy Ashburn (R-Bakersfield) and Barbara Alby, a member of the State Board of Equalization. All of California's major newspapers have endorsed the measure, and no ballot argument opposing it has been filed.