Capitol Report

League of Women Voters of Florida

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WELCOME TO ANOTHER EXCITING YEAR OF THE FLORIDA LEGISLATURE.

Since December of 2008 committee meetings have been taking place in preparation of the 2009 Legislative Session. The League has several priority issues which are expected to get attention (some good, some bad) during this year's regular session, which begins in March, and activities on some of these have already begun during pre-session committee weeks. An update on League issues, the legislative process and schedule is the focus of this first 2009 Capitol Report.

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2009 LEGISLATIVE SCHEDULE

Regular Interim Committee Meetings have been held three weeks since December 2008. There have been two weeks of Appropriations Interim Committee Meetings. There was to be another week of Regular Meetings but the scheduled week of January 5th was cancelled due to special session. There is one additional scheduled committee week starting February 16th for further pre-session activities.

A special session was held January 5th through January 14th to balance the state's budget after Florida experienced larger than expected revenue shortfalls. The House and Senate passed 17 bills making $2.6 billion in reductions to the FY 08-09 budget.

The 2009 Regular Session began on Tuesday, March 3rd. The last day for regularly scheduled committee meetings is April 21st. The last day of the Regular Session is May 1st, and the Legislature has the prerogative of extending the Regular Session or later calling a Special Session if it does not complete its work on schedule or has an issue which it wants to address prior to the next regular session.

LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION

Updates on League legislative issues will be provided on a regular basis through the Capitol Report, which is published most weeks during the Session. This issue is a review of important activities to date. One additional issue will be provided prior to session beginning. And there will be a wrap-up report at the close of session.

Important information may also be accessed through the Internet at www.leg.state.fl.us. League members are encouraged to consult this site for information like:

- Committee Appointments: The Senate President and House Speaker

appointed Committee Chairs as part of the Organizational Session and their names as well as the members and staff of each Committee may be found here with contact information. Recently, the House has changed several Committee Chairs and assignments due to a change in the leadership of the House. Special consideration is often given to bills sponsored by members of the committee hearing the bill; this is particularly true of bills sponsored by the chair of the committee.

- Bills: Roughly 2183 bills have been filed for this Session already. The deadline for filing bills for introduction was March 3, 2009 at noon. However there are ways to get around this and some new bills may show up past then. Copies of bills are available on the above mentioned state legislative website along with sponsor information, the Committees to which bills have been referred for consideration, any legislative staff analyses that have been done on the bill and any actions taken on the bill with dates and voting records.

- Committee Information: Depending on what issue you are tracking there are generally standard committees of reference based on issue, although this can vary. It is a good idea if you want to track an issue that you attempt to identify prior to session what are standard committees of reference to deal with that issue. For instance, last year most legislation dealing with elections went through the Senate Committee on Ethics and Elections and the House Committee on Ethics and Elections (this year renamed the Government Affairs Policy Committee). This year the House reorganized its committee system by adopting a structure of Councils with Committees under them. By identifying the committees generally identified with your issue/s you can (1) become familiar with the members of the committee and the committee staff and develop relationships with these folks ahead of time, (2) participate in pre session committee meetings of these committees where there may be a variety of workshops or special presentations on the issue/s you are concerned about and (3) track activities in these committees more closely for existing bill activities as well as efforts to waive rules and develop new bills or substantially alter existing bills to address these issues.

- Committee Projects: Committee staff is assigned projects to work on in between Sessions, involving research and recommendations on diverse policy issues. Their reports go on-line once approved for consideration and are then taken up by the assigned Committees for action. They often result in Proposed Committee Bills, bills offered by a committee as a whole as opposed to an individual legislator.

- Committee Packets: For each committee meeting a packet is prepared by the staff. These include an agenda, any presentation materials being addressed at the committee meeting, any amendments being offered on bills on the agenda, staff analyses on bills on the agenda and more. They are generally available on line or at the document centers on the third floor of each chamber's building the day of and frequently the day before the scheduled committee meeting, depending on the filing deadline for the meeting. As a general rule it is always good to check the document center just before a committee begins for any updated packets or addendums. This becomes particularly important as session progresses and nears end.

- Calendars: Available for both the House and Senate are weekly and daily calendars of activities. These include activities for full Session as well as Committees. They are generally published on line in advance of the dates and then are updated closer to the time of the actual activity. It is a good idea to check the weekly calendar on Monday morning each week of Session and to check the daily calendars the evening before.

This information may be used to aid League members in being timely informed so as to play an even stronger role in grass roots advocacy.

LEAGUE PRIORITY ISSUES

The LWVF set three 2009 Legislative priorities: Government, Education in Florida and Social Policy in Florida. Under Government there are priority subcategories as follows: Finance and Taxation, Redistricting, and Citizen Initiatives including the Statutory Initiative and Election Law. Under Education in Florida our priorities are: Funding, Accountability and Civics Education. Social Policy has as its priority subcategory: Health Care.

The League has decided to once again hire a professional lobbyist, Heather Walker with WildLaw will represent us throughout the 2009 legislative session on some of the priority issues. Heather will also coordinate the Volunteer LWV of Tallahassee Lobbying Corps and Board and Off-Board Point Persons on Priority issues. We are still looking for folks to participate with this so please contact Marilynn Wills (marilynnwills@msn.com) or Rebecca Sager (rsager@music.org) if you are interested.

Additionally, during the interim, LWVF volunteers interviewed different members of the House and Senate to learn and understand each member's stance on key issues. An internal database of this information is compiled of these interviews in order to give the League a head start on evaluating legislators' positions on the different issues that will likely come up this Legislative Session. The League would like to thank all of the local Leagues and members that participated in the legislative interview process.

GOVERNMENT IN FLORIDA

FINANCE AND TAXATION

The League supports a state fiscal structure that is equitable in its distribution of the tax responsibility and responsive to public needs.

There was one special session already this year in January addressing budget shortfall issues. The Legislature had to make cuts to satisfy the balanced budget requirements. Education and other social programs were hard hit by these cuts. The League expects more budget cuts as the shortfall projections for next year continue to be increased.

Other tax issues will also likely arise during this year's session. Everyone on the Finance & Tax Council was asked to review all current sales tax exemptions. When the council members reported back on February 11th only a few members recommended eliminating some of the exemptions they reviewed, but none of the elimination recommendations were adopted by the Council at this meeting. The League supports tax legislation which does not jeopardize local service, addresses infrastructure deficits, and removes unfair tax exemptions which affect governments' ability to serve citizens. Both the House and Senate Finance & Tax Councils continue to review sales tax exemptions.

Rep. Hukill filed **HB 1163** calling for all reviewable tax exemptions to be

considered for repeal or modification by the Joint Legislative Sunset Committee and for all reviewable exemptions to expire if not renewed or modified.

The Senate Finance and Tax Committee initiated a fast-track review of sales tax exemptions on February 19th; they intend to have recommendation to the Senate's Budget Committee by early April.

REDISTRICTING

The League supports single-member election districts that are equal in population, that provide access for minorities, are compact and, when possible, take local characteristics such as political and geographical boundaries into consideration.

A joint resolution, **SJR202**, has been filed by Senator Justice, which would address many of the League's concerns pertaining to redistricting. The bill proposes amendments to the constitution pertaining to redistricting and reapportionment. The bill would create an independent commission to set up redistricting plans. By having an independent commission draw the lines for districts will ideally alleviate concerns of gerrymandering and other political influences affecting redistricting.

Recently, the Supreme Court approved the proposed amendment language providing standards for the drawing of state and federal districts as satisfying the one issue requirement. The League is assisting with efforts to collect signatures to get these provisions on the ballot in 2010.

CITIZEN INITIATIVES

In the past few session, the League spoke out against proposed bills which further limiting citizen access and elevating the role of the legislature in writing, rewriting and regulating the constitution have already been drafted for the upcoming session. For the past three sessions, the League has fought to keep restrictions on the initiative process from passing. The legislature was successful in getting the 60% amendment on the ballot, and it passed. The revocation process was put in place, and while we were trying to amend it, it was struck down in the Appeals Court.

As bills addressing citizen initiatives arise, the League will oppose bills that increases moneyed interests' strangle-hold on the initiative process and where appropriate advance the idea of a citizen statutory initiative.

Rep. Dorworth filed **HB 497** requiring registration, fees and training for paid petition circulators. The League will be following this bill closely because it would cause problems immediately for the Fair Districting initiative and for other initiatives the League supports.

Election Law

Rep. Hays sponsored **HJR 81** to place an amendment on the 2010 ballot to repeal the public campaign financing program citizens voted to establish in 1998. This resolution has already been acted on favorably by the Government Affairs Policy Committee and the Economic Development & Community Affairs Policy Council. It moves on to the Transportation & Economic Development Appropriations Committee. Sen. Haridopolous sponsors the identical resolution, **SJR 566**, in the Senate. The Senate Ethics & Elections Committee voted favorably to move this resolution to the Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations Committee.

The League opposes repealing the public campaign financing program; we believe that citizen owned elections are the best way to ensure open and elections with

maximum citizen participation in the political process. We also feel this program helps to hold down campaign cost by providing an incentive to candidates who chose to abide by spending limits to receive public money and that it serves the electorate by preventing individuals and corporations from gaining undue influence over elected officials.

Education in Florida

Legislators attempted to reduce the influence of the FCAT scores on the grading of schools during the 2008 legislative session. There was a large education bill passed during the last session, but there were other bills that would modify use of the FCAT that never made it out of committee. We may see more activity along those lines during the 2009 session.

The League will support legislation that supports a reliable accountability system for measuring achievement of all students, supports high standards for teacher certification and compensation. And where appropriate oppose legislation that decreases the role of the state in funding of the public school system or does not fully finance programs mandated by the state

CIVICS EDUCATION

The LWVF seeks to restore the historic civic mission of our schools. The key to strengthening civic education is improving state and local policy support for it. The League of Women Voters of Florida has made civic education a legislative priority for the last three sessions.

Representative McBurney has introduced **HB 13** including social studies as a subject tested on the FCAT; it has no companion bill in the Senate. H 13 Senator Wise, Chair of Pre-K - 12 Appropriations Committee, filed **SB 2174** as the identical bill to **HB 157** and similar to **HB 13**.

HB 157 and **S 0450** requires DOE to encourage that school districts to adopt service-learning programs in K-12.

The League supports legislation which requires civic education in middle school as well as enhancing civic education in high school. The League believes that for our system of representative democracy to be healthy, we need citizens who understand what it means to participate in governing themselves, actually engage in that self-governance, have the knowledge to do it well and appreciate the complexities of the process and understand how it works.

SOCIAL POLICY IN FLORIDA

FINANCING AND DELIVERY OF HEALTHCARE

During the 2008 legislative session, the League joined with other groups to promote the "Health Care Consumer's Right to Information Act." Passed by the legislature in 2008, the bill will take transparency an important step forward. LWVF will continue to work with the Health Check Coalition on health issues and providing health care to all citizens of Florida.

Sen. Gaetz introduced **SB556**, which abolishes the Medicaid Low-Income Pool Council**. SB556** was on the Health Regulation Committee agenda but temporarily postponed on February 18th. SB 556 passed out of the Health Regulation Committee on March 4th after a Committee Substitute.

SB620, introduced by Sen. Oelrich redefines the term "health facility" to allow additional types of health facilities to receive assistance. **SB 620** was moved favorably out of the Health Regulation Committee on February 18th. SB 620 moved out of both the Community Affairs Committee and the Policy & Steering Committee on Ways and Means on March 3rd. The Senate Health and Human

Services Committee and the House Health and Family Services Policy Council are closely watching for potential funds to come from the Federal Economic Stimulus package.

As more bills are filed, the League will continue to identify bills which address the above League priorities. Throughout the 2009 Legislative Session, the League will track the bills which address the League priorities, and will participate actively for or against such bills depending on the League's stance on the bill.

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR MEN & WOMEN
While not a priority for the League this session because of the unlikelihood of anything significantly happening with this, ERA remains an overall League priority. Once again there is a resolution in the house (**HCR 8003**) and one in the Senate (**SCR 1008**) to ratify the proposed amendment to the United States Constitution relating to equal rights for men and women. Senators Joyner, Rich, Smith and Sobel are sponsoring **SCR 1008** and Representatives Planas is sponsoring **H8003**. League members can contact their legislators and ask them to sign on to these two.

WATCH FOR YOUR *CAPITOL REPORT* EACH FRIDAY OF THE SESSION FOR NEWS ON PRIORITY ISSUES AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP.

FOR FURTHER INFO:
The newsletter is available at the LWVF's website: http://www.lwvfla.org/

C. Heather Walker, Legislative Advocate

Heather *is a Staff Attorney with WildLaw in their Florida Office. WildLaw provides a variety of legal and professional services to communities and grassroots organizations working on environmental issues in the public interest. Heather will be representing the League this session on some of the priority issues and writing and publishing the* Capitol Report*, as disseminated by the LWVF Tallahassee office.*

GET INVOLVED! MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

FOR UPDATES ON OR COPIES OF PROPOSED LEGISLATION, CALL LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION 1-800-342-1827 OR VISIT THE FLORIDA ONLINE SUNSHINE HOME PAGE AT www.leg.state.fl.us.