



League of Women Voters of Florida

Capitol Report 2010

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540 Beverly Court
Tallahassee, Fl. 32301

Ben Wilcox, LWVF
Governmental Consultant

Overview

Since October of 2009, committee meetings have been taking place in preparation for the 2010 Legislative Session. The League has several priority issues which are expected to receive attention during this year's regular session which begins March 2nd. Work on some of these issues has already begun during pre-session committee weeks.

This will be the second year Senate President Jeff Atwater and House Speaker Larry Cretul will lead the legislature. Senator Mike Haridopolos is expected to be elected Senate President next year and this year he chairs the Senate Reapportionment Committee which is working on one of the League's top priorities. Representative Dean Cannon is expected to be elected Speaker next year and this year he chairs the House Select Policy Council on Strategic and Economic Planning which is also working on redistricting along with offshore oil and gas drilling.

There has been one significant personnel change. Senator John Thrasher has been elected the chair of the Republican Party of Florida. After his election, he resigned as the chair of the Senate Ethics and Elections Committee. His replacement has yet to be named.

Much of the talk by legislative leaders continues to be about the budget. The state is facing another year of declining revenues and the deficit for 2010 is projected to be \$3.5 billion. Without new sources of revenue, lawmakers will likely have to make further budget cuts and face the grim possibility of state worker lay-offs and program reductions. Ben Wilcox and Marilyn Wills attended a seminar in February on the so-called Taxpayers Bill of Rights or Tabor. The seminar was held by the Florida Center for Fiscal and Economic Policy which opposes Tabor because it ties the hands of the legislature when it might become necessary to raise new revenue. The League is prepared to oppose this legislation should it be introduced.

The issue of oil and gas drilling off the Florida coast continues to be discussed in the House Select Policy Council on Strategic and Economic Planning. Senate President Jeff Atwater is moving more cautiously than the House. He has tasked the staff of the Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee with the job of doing a "detailed and comprehensive review of the implications of offshore drilling."

There were three weeks of committee meetings scheduled in February. The meetings scheduled for the week of February 8th focused solely on the budget with the exception of

a joint meeting of the Senate Reapportionment Committee and the House Select Policy Council on Strategic and Economic Planning.

With the threat and now the reality of redistricting reform amendments making the November ballot, committees in both Houses of the Legislature are in full defensive mode. It appears likely that they will take some action to either mount a legal challenge to the amendments or put alternative proposals on the ballot. Ellen Freidin, campaign chair of FairDistrictsFlorida attended a joint meeting of the Senate and House committees. She was grilled by members for three and a half hours with scripted and, for the most part, redundant questions. At one point Senator Haridopolos told Ms. Freidin to “look at me when I’m talking to you.” The League is monitoring these meetings closely.

Another bill of interest to the League that has already seen action involves a proposal to require civic education testing at the middle school level. House Bill 105 was passed by the Education Policy Council with League support. Its next stop will be the House floor. It also passed the Senate Education Pre-K Committee by a unanimous vote, but still faces a hearing by the Senate Education Pre-K Appropriations Committee.

In the area of elections, the Senate Ethics and Elections Committee passed Senate Bill 900. The bill is a package of mostly noncontroversial election administration changes. It does contain a provision that says state law preempts local ordinances when dealing with election administration. This concerns some who favor the ability of counties to adopt stricter standards for election procedures like audits. It also rolls back the date from 2012 to 2016 when voting machines for disabled voters are required to produce a paper record. The League is monitoring this bill closely.

League Vice-President Marilyn Wills attended an election workshop held by the House Governmental Affairs Policy Committee. Eleven bills were discussed during the meeting but no votes were taken. Several of the bills dealt with absentee voting and the military. Other bills addressed student voter education, voter caging, early voting and a requirement that poll location be listed on a voter’s voter card.

League President Deirdre Macnab and Director Pat Drago came to Tallahassee in February for a round of meetings. The meetings included Senator Mike Bennett, Division of Elections Director Donald Palmer, Representative Charles McBurney, the staff of Taxwatch and the staff for Senator John Thrasher.

League Priority Issues

The LWVF has set six program areas for 2010 including Government, Education, Justice, Social Policy, Sustainability and Natural Resources. Under three program areas there are priority subcategories as follows:

Government: Promote an open government that is responsive to the people of the state.

- Equitable Taxation - 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. Several bills have been filed, but so

far little action has been taken. It's expected the League will once again be in opposition to the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR), although the bill has yet to be filed. Other legislation has been filed which the League is monitoring including a review of sales tax exemptions, applying the sales tax to Internet sales and requiring multi-state corporations to pay corporate income tax on profits made in Florida. Governor Crist has also proposed reducing the corporate income tax.

- **Redistricting Reform** – 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. Committees in both Houses have been meeting to discuss the 2012 cycle of redistricting and the possible effect amendments 5 and 6 would have on the process. Much of the discussion has centered around the question of whether the amendments would hurt minority representation. It appears likely the legislature will try to attack the amendments in some fashion and the League is prepared to oppose those attacks.
- **Citizen Initiatives** – For the past four sessions, the League has fought against passage of new restrictions on the citizen's initiative process. As bills addressing citizen initiatives arise; the League will oppose bills that increase the moneyed interests' strangle-hold on the initiative process and the legislative process and, where appropriate, advance the idea of a citizen statutory initiative.
- **Elections** – The League supports legislation that promotes stricter election audits and would give the Supervisors of Elections more flexibility in selecting early voting sites. Several bills have already been filed regarding the early voting issue including SB 828, SB256 and HB 57. Secretary of State Kurt Browning has told the League he is not supporting an expansion of early voting this year.

Elections bills in the Senate will go through the Committee on Ethics and Elections and Former Committee Chair Thrasher filed at least 5 "shell" bills expressing "legislative intent" to revise elections or ethics laws. These bills will be the vehicle for amendments once the Chair decides what he or she wants to do. In the House, elections bills will go through the Governmental Affairs Policy Committee and the Economic Development and Community Affairs Policy Council.

Education: Priorities are: Funding, Accountability and Civic Education.

- **Civic Education** – The League is supporting HB 105 and Senate Bill 1096 which would create the "Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act." It would require an end-of-the year test on civic education at the middle school level.

Social Policy: Priority is Health Care.

- **Health care reform** – The league will continue to work with a coalition of organizations including the Florida Public Interest Research group to promote a health care system that provides access to a basic level of quality care for all Florida residents and controls

health care costs.

Get Involved!

Ben Wilcox has been hired by The League to be its professional lobbyist for the 2010 legislative session. He will also coordinate the volunteer LWV of Tallahassee Lobbying Corps, the State Board and Off-Board Point Persons on priority issues. We are still looking for folks to participate in the Lobbying Corps so please contact Marilyn Wills (marilynwill@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 these interviews gives 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.

Updates on League legislative issues will be provided on a regular basis through Capitol Report which is published every week during the Session. This issue is a review of important activities to date. 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 Information:** Depending on what issue you are tracking, there are generally standard committees of reference based on issue. It is a good idea if you want to track an issue that you attempt to identify prior to session the standard committees of reference that deal with that issue. 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 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 as well any efforts to waive the rules and develop new bills or substantially alter existing bills. The names of the Committee Chairs, members and staff of each Committee may be found at the above mentioned legislative website along with contact information.
- **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 or 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 materials being presented at the committee meeting, any amendments being offered to 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. As a general rule it is always good to check the document center just before a committee meeting begins for any updated packets.

This becomes particularly important as session progresses and nears end.

- **Bills:** Roughly 3,550 bills have been filed for this Session already. The deadline for filing bills for introduction is March 2, 2010 at noon. However there are ways to get around the deadline and new bills may show up past then. Copies of bills are available on the 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.

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/> . For updates on or copies of proposed legislation, call legislative information at 1-800-342-1827 or visit the Florida Online Sunshine homepage at www.leg.state.fl.us.