



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

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Assault on Open Government Moves Forward in Capitol Today

Tallahassee, FL -- Today was a dark day in the halls of the Florida Capitol as new legislation limiting citizens' "right to know" moved forward. The House Judiciary Committee passed a PCB that would give current and former legislators and staff unique immunity from answering questions under oath about their legislative duties.

"One word describes this bill: outrageous," said Deirdre Macnab, president of the League of Women Voters of Florida. "This bill takes the smoke-filled rooms of state government and puts a clear billboard across the door: "Citizens May Not Enter."

While this bill is troubling for many reasons, it strikes the League as particularly problematic in light of the ongoing redistricting process.

The Florida Constitution requires legislators to follow the language approved by voters: "No apportionment plan or individual district shall be drawn with the intent to favor or disfavor a political party or an incumbent." According to the Constitution, therefore, the Legislature's intent is very relevant. Yet now the House Judiciary Committee's decision to move this law forward would make the intent of both current and prior legislators and staff unavailable. If they had private meetings where they directed that maps be drawn in violation of the criteria, the courts and the public might never find out. In fact, if a staff member resigned because he or she was asked to do something improper, that person could be gagged from testifying if subpoenaed.

Interestingly, House Redistricting Committee Chairman Will Weatherford (R-Wesley Chapel) has repeatedly claimed this as the most transparent redistricting process ever. This bill would throw an impenetrable cloak over that process for the public.

The inconvenient truth for the Legislature is that the courts have already adequately protected legislators from improper intrusions into their legislative function. But this bill would create a blanket privilege that would preclude all inquiries, including proper ones.

As Rep. Richard Steinberg (D-Miami Beach) noted, no legislators have been compelled to testify against their will under the current law.

Florida open government laws are well-respected in this state and have served as an example to our nation. With this bill, the Florida House has said to citizens: "Our decisions are none of your business."

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