

League of Women Voters, Sussex County

Report to County Council

Sunshine Day – Spring 2016

As part of the League of Women Voters' support for openness in government, its Observer Corps monitors the activities of governmental bodies for issues of importance to the League and the county. The Observer Corps of the League of Women Voters of Sussex County was organized in January of 2009. We have now completed our seventh year of activity. Observers attend County Council and Planning and Zoning Commission meetings. Reports from Observers are compiled into monthly reports and submitted to the Board of Directors of the League of Women Voters of Sussex County (LWVSC). The annual report to the Council is developed by compiling the major issues and concerns noted during the past year as viewed by Observers and as they relate to positions of the League of Women Voters. The League is proud to report that Observers have been in attendance at 100% of Council meetings during the past year.

HIGHLIGHTS:

1. Water

- Clean water is of the highest priority for citizens. We urge the co-operation of the Council with all relevant government agencies to ensure that water quality is protected for present and future generations.

2. Planning

- The need for improved transportation systems and options are at a critical point due to the rapid development of the county. We urge follow up with the recommendations of DELDOT regarding the development of a Transportation Improvement District for the Lewes/Rehoboth area. We note that a presentation from DELDOT included the information that funds to support the comprehensive approach to transportation issues are available to Sussex County at this time. We are concerned to note that since the presentation of this information in December of 2015, no further discussion or action has been taken by the Council.
- When considering transportation matters in the development of the new comprehensive plan, we urge the Council to address road standards for developers.
- We are pleased to note the much-needed increase of staffing for Planning services. It had been stated that part of the job of new planning personnel was to oversee a carrying capacity study. No further action has been reported on this matter. We believe that the public should now be apprised of the status of this study.

- We note that the process for approving time extensions for expiring land use applications was changed to allow for short term, case-by-case approvals, as opposed to blanket approvals which had been used in the past. Under this new approval process, a July 1, 2016 deadline was imposed, at which time applicants would need to meet specific criteria related to completion of the projects. We urge vigilance of the Council and Planning and Zoning Commission to ensure that applicants meet all stated criteria.
- We look forward to the Council's leadership in the development of the new comprehensive plan for Sussex County. We view this plan as critical for the future of the county. We anticipate the close co-operation of the Council with citizen groups and municipalities, as input is sought from all stakeholders. The League of Women Voters has sponsored five countywide workshops, one in each of the councilmatic districts, and five countywide forums to inform and involve the public with the various aspects of this planning process. Such activities will continue during the upcoming months. We invite your participation in these sessions.

3. Citizen's Right to Know/Citizen Participation

- Agenda items related to land use matters contain limited information about the project under consideration. It is difficult for the public to ascertain the nature of the project unless additional descriptive detail is provided. An example of this is to be noted on the agenda of August 18, 2015 which indicates that a report would be presented regarding "Change of Zone No. 1770, application of TD Rehoboth, LLC." This project is known to the public as the Overbrook Town Center. It is suggested that the generally recognizable descriptor for the project be included on the agenda so that the public is clearly informed about what matter is under consideration on that day.
- The published agenda for Council meetings informs the public of actions to be taken and provides stated times for public hearings of interest to citizens. We believe it is most important that every effort is made to adhere to the published schedule. We note with concern the Council activities of the meeting of August 4, 2015. The Council convened on that day at 10:06 AM. The agenda for the meeting was promptly amended and the Council voted to go into Executive Session at 10:09. The Council remained in Executive Session for two hours. At the conclusion of this session, it was announced there would be no report or announcement regarding the Executive Session. The public meeting then resumed, to be concluded in approximately 20 minutes. We also note that the published agenda for the December 1, 2015 meeting stated that Public Hearings would commence at 1:30. At that meeting, which began at 1 PM, the Council adjourned to Executive Session at 1:30, returning approximately 50 minutes later. Citizens wishing to comment on matters to be considered during the Public Hearings were required to wait this considerable amount of time. No prediction was offered as to how long the Executive Session would last on either of these dates, requiring citizens with other time obligations to wait indefinitely. We feel that this type of scheduling is unfair to the public and does not conform to the spirit of open government.

- Accessibility to members of the public who require reasonable accommodations to participate in Council meetings is paramount. It is to be noted that assistive listening devices, while cited as available, sometimes are not. Amplification is available in the chambers to ensure that the comments of Council members are heard by the public. We acknowledge that some Council members diligently use this amplification when making their remarks. We urge all Council members to use this amplification so that their comments can be understood and evaluated by the public.
- The technology upgrades made to the Council chambers have significantly added to the ability of the public to understand material being presented during meetings. We commend the Council for these excellent improvements.
- The enhancements made to the County website, which enable citizens to research land use decisions regarding specific properties, are commendable. The County is to be complimented for these much needed improvements.
- We note the orderly and respectful process utilized by the Planning and Zoning Commission for including public input in its decision-making process.

4. Additional Comments

- In the past, we have noted our concerns regarding the appropriateness of the practice of the Council in awarding grants from their individual accounts in response to requests from various groups. We have noted efforts to revise the application process so that additional information is required of applicants. We still, however, remain concerned about this process as the purposes for the grants, and the amounts in taxpayer funds awarded to groups, seem arbitrary.
- Staff members are consistently respectful and helpful in responding to questions from us and from the public. We compliment them on their professionalism in handling the duties of their positions.

IN CONCLUSION:

The Observer Corps of the League of Women Voters will be continuing its activities this year. We share with you the goal of ensuring good government for the citizens of Sussex County.

Dr. Janet Ambrose
Observer Corps Coordinator/League of Women Voters of Sussex County

