



League of Women Voters of Sussex County, DE

Annual Report to County Council

Sunshine Day – Spring 2017

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 Sussex County and the League. The Observer Corps of the League of Women Voters of Sussex County (LWVSC) was organized in January of 2009. For the past eight years, observers have attended meetings of the County Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission. Each month the observers compile reports and submit them to the LWVSC Board of Directors. This Annual Report to the County 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. LWVSC 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 all citizens. In addition to being critical to the health and safety of residents, clean water is essential to the economic development of the region. 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 heavy reliance on realty transfer taxes as a primary revenue source for the county is of concern. In our opinion, the county needs a more forward-looking, sustainable economic model. We anticipate the continued efforts of the Council and the Office of Economic Development toward the diversification of revenue sources to ensure the financial stability of the county for decades to come.
- We acknowledge the development of a new sign ordinance to address problems in this area. The process of developing this ordinance was confusing to the public. We feel it will be necessary to monitor the impact of this new ordinance to determine whether it produces the desired results or needs to be re-visited.
- We are pleased to note the amendment of ordinances revamping county codes dealing with drainage, lot grading, road construction, bonding, and project construction, including closeout regulations. Significant steps have been taken through this effort in ensuring that community requirements are clear and enforceable, and citizens are protected from those in the building industry who do not adhere to the promises made when developing communities.
- We note the progress made in moving forward with the Transportation Improvement District. We look forward to learning of opportunities for public input on this project. It is unclear how the future land use projections provided by the county as part of the development of this District will interface with the components of the 2018 Comprehensive Plan.

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- The Council districts do not align with the districts assigned to Planning and Zoning Commissioners. The reason for this disconnect is not clear to the public.
- We are pleased to note the appointment of a female Planning and Zoning Commissioner, as well as a female member of the Board of Adjustments. Efforts should continue to be made to diversify the members of Boards and Commissions so that their composition reflects the diverse perspectives of county residents.
- The introduction of digital GIS zoning maps to replace the outdated paper maps previously in use is a significant accomplishment. Staff members responsible for this improvement are to be highly complimented.
- The availability of affordable housing in Sussex County is of concern. We note the revision to the Sussex County Rental Program designed to encourage developers to expand affordable rental housing opportunities within the County. It will be important to assess the impact of this revision to determine whether it is successful.

3. Comprehensive Plan

- We are pleased to note that the Planning and Zoning Commission has extended its opportunities for public input into the 2018 Comprehensive Plan by providing time for public comment at each of its meetings. Providing monthly opportunities for public comment at the beginning of meetings is a noted effort to enable citizens with time constraints to express their views. We also note that public comment is invited at the beginning and end of the scheduled Planning and Zoning Commission Workshops.
- We view the development of the 2018 Comprehensive Plan as a critical task which will provide a roadmap for the future development of Sussex County. This document should be a meaningful tool rather than the result of an exercise to comply with statutory requirements. The League of Women Voters of Sussex County has worked diligently to educate citizens about matters which will be considered in the development of this plan. Five forums have been led by the League during the past year. Topics have included “Educating for Wise Growth in Sussex County”, “What Drives DELDOT – Parts 1 and 2”, “The Developers’ Perspective: An Effective 2018 Comprehensive Plan” and “Affordable Housing and Substandard Housing Issues”. 193 persons have participated in these educational forums. We are pleased to note participation by Council members, Planning and Zoning Commissioners, a state legislator and county staff. We continue our efforts to educate and engage the public in this important process and invite your continued participation in these forums.

4. Citizen’s Right to Know/Citizen Participation

- We request that the Administrator’s Report presented at Council meetings include notation of newly added staff members.
- In our last report to the Council, we noted that agenda items related to land use matters contain limited information about projects to be voted upon, making it difficult for the

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public to ascertain the exact projects under consideration. While more specific information is sometimes noted on the agenda, this practice is inconsistent. We note that on the November 15, 2016 agenda, a “change of zone No. 1802” was to be reported upon. This project was known to the public as the Gills Neck Village Center. We request that generally recognizable descriptors for projects be included on agendas to clearly inform the public what matters are under consideration on that day.

- The amplification system in the Council Chambers should be evaluated for its effectiveness. At Council meetings, and at other times when public meetings are held in the Chambers, it is difficult to hear comments being made by speakers. This inadequacy interferes with the ability of the public to understand and evaluate what is being presented.

5. Additional Comments

- We remain concerned about the procedures for distributing funds in Council districts through grant allocations provided to specific Council members. While these grant requests are typically unanimously approved, there have been occasions where Council members vote against the requests, with no explanation. Providing reasoning for approving or denying grant requests enables the public to understand why such decisions are being made, and ensuring the public that such awards are not made or denied for arbitrary or discriminatory reasons.
- We acknowledge the continuing co-operation and courtesy afforded by staff members who respond to us and to the public with requested information on various issues. Their professionalism in handling the duties of their positions is recognized and appreciated.

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