

## Report to County Council

As part of the League of Women Voters' support for openness in government, its Observer Corps monitors governmental bodies for issues of importance to the League and to 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 second year of activity. This year, in addition to County Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission, we also began attending meetings of the Board of Adjustment. Reports from the Observers were compiled into monthly reports and submitted to the Board of the League of Women Voters of Sussex County.

Between February, 2010 and January, 2011, League of Women Voters' Observers attended 70% of County Council meetings, 38% of the meetings of the Planning and Zoning Commission and 65% of the meetings of the Board of Adjustments. This report is a compilation of the major themes and concerns from the past year as viewed by the Observers.

### Adequacy of information available to the public.

- 1) Hearing the speaker-
  - a) Observers at Board of Adjustments and Planning and Zoning Commission reported that speakers did not always speak into the microphone or were too far away from the microphone to be heard.
- 2) Agenda information
  - a) There were frequent reports of lack of specificity about property locations and descriptions on the agendas of the Board of Adjustments and the Planning and Zoning Commission.
  - b) There is a general lack of descriptive information on the County Council agendas. However, on several occasions, efforts were made to accommodate the public.
    - i) The Budget was introduced using a PowerPoint presentation that was visible to the audience.
    - ii) Maps of proposed water district extensions were provided at the Oct. 26, 2010 meeting.
    - iii) A financial document under discussion was distributed at a meeting in Jan. 2011.
  - c) On two occasions there were not an adequate number of agendas available for the public at County Council.
  - d) On several occasions, cases before the Board of Adjustment and Planning and Zoning Commission appeared to have been discussed outside of meetings- a FOIA violation.

### Zoning and Land Use

- 1) The approved budget includes the purchase of software that would provide notice of expiring and expired conditional use and other timed approvals. Since the information provided in response to a proposal to allow additional extensions was obtained manually at a meeting in February, 2011, lack of this function evidently continues.

- 2) Discussion about filling the vacant position of county planner occurred throughout the year, but a qualified planner has not been hired. The salary being offered is not adequate to attract a certified planner and the job description lacks important research and long term planning functions.
- 3) Support for development where there is no adequate infrastructure continues.
- 4) In September, 2010, an Observer asked for maps showing existing and approved subdivision and conditional use requests and was told that compilation of these maps was incomplete. These maps are still not available at the end of the year.

#### Affordable Housing

- 1) Vacant, county owned houses were provided for use by Habitat for Humanity, after a competitive request process. This was a commendable win-win project.
- 2) Manufactured Homes-
  - a. Issues with manufactured homes led to the formation of an ad hoc committee in April.
  - b. A report, not approved by the ad hoc committee was submitted to and accepted by County Council.
  - c. Based on the report, the code was revised. Some homeowners contended that the work of the ad committee is incomplete. In November, County Council said it would “revisit” the issue, but there has been no action.

#### Appointments/Reappointments to the Board of Adjustment

- 1) The Institute of Public Administration offered training for Boards of Adjustment in Dover in May, 2010. No members of the Board attended. Whether or not this type of training could or should be required for Board members was discussed at County Council, but no decision was reached.
- 2) County Council initiated a more formal review process for appointment and two candidates were interviewed during Council meetings. One was rejected and a decision about the other’s appointment was deferred because of the absence of one member and a desire to wait until after a County Council/Board of Adjustment workshop scheduled for August.
- 3) The County Council/Board of Adjustment workshop in August identified problems, including inadequate preparation of applicants, “traditional” decisions, and long standing, but recently discovered code violations.
- 4) At the end of the year, the two appointments to the Board of Adjustment still had not been made for terms that expired in June, 2010.

#### Ethics

- 1) A workshop on ethics, requested by a council member, has not been held.

#### Based on the past year’s observations, the League of Women Voters of Sussex County propose the following actions:

- 1) Hire a Certified Planner with a salary, job scope and authority appropriate for a professional.

- 2) Provide agenda information so that the public can understand and follow discussions. Information that is distributed to the press should also be available to other attendees. Projected images should be used, when appropriate, so that the public can visualize site plans, etc.
- 3) Officials should make sure that they can be heard by the audience in the chamber and online.
- 4) Computerize information about expiring and expired conditional use and other timed approvals and make this information available on line.
- 5) Make maps showing existing and approved subdivisions and conditional use requests and make these readily available to the public.
- 6) Reconvene the ad hoc Committee on Manufactured Homes to address homeowners' unresolved issues.
- 7) Fill the expired positions on the Board of Adjustment and require that all members and the Board attorney attend training about their responsibilities and the laws and regulations involved.

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

Carole Somers  
Coordinator of the Observer Corps  
League of Women Voters of Sussex County