



**League of Women Voters of Sussex County  
Observer Corps First Annual Report  
March 2010**

The Observer Corps of the League of Women Voters of Sussex County was organized in January of 2009 and began its activities in February. As part of the League's support for openness in government, the purpose of Observer Corps is to monitor governmental bodies for issues of importance to the league and to the county. Our emphasis this year was to have League Observers present at as many County Council and Planning and Zoning Commission meeting as possible. Reports from these Observers were compiled into monthly reports and submitted to the Board of the League of Women Voters, Sussex County.

Between February, 2009 and January, 2010, League of Women Voters Observers attended 60% of County Council meetings and 46% of the meetings of the Planning and Zoning Commission. This report reflects areas of commendation, concern and suggestions from the Observers

I. Courtesy and Respect toward the Public and Among Members of the Council or Commission

County Council

- Healthy, open exchange of opinion among members was noted.
- The public was treated respectfully when making inquiries of the Council.
- Members were generally courteous to each other; however there has been a trend toward interruption and rudeness over the last several months.

Planning and Zoning Commission

- Good, respectful discussions were observed. Members are engaged and ask good questions.
- The chairman addresses the public in a positive way to encourage participation, but he is not always consistent in applying rules about public comments, i.e. that the person can make only one statement. His use of humor may be intended to put persons at ease, but it may also be misunderstood.
- There is no regular opportunity for public comment or questions at Planning and Zoning.

Suggestions

- Provide an introductory statement about time limits and avoidance of repetition prior to having input from the public. Apply the limits on time and repetition consistently.
- Develop a one-page information sheet how applications are assigned, reviewed and reported on. Have copies of this information available on-line and at the meetings. ( for Planning and Zoning Commission)

## II. Communication with the Public

### County Council

- The Council provides a period for public questions and comments at meetings.
- There was a clear invitation and accommodation made to include the public in attending the joint County Council/ Planning and Zoning Commission Workshop on Development.
- Agenda are available on-line but not always at the meetings. There is a lack of detail in the agenda items.
- The budget report for the first quarter was discussed but copies of the report were not generally available.
- At public hearings (both Planning and Zoning Commission and County Council), the applicant has the advantage of presenting first and having unlimited time. This wears down the attention and endurance of the commissioners/ or council members and members of the public waiting to address the issue.

### Planning and Zoning Commission

- At some hearings, maps and charts are placed where the public can see them and they are invited to come forward to look at them. At regular meetings this information is not available.
- On occasion, testimonial letters were not read if they were deemed too long, but a short letter in favor of a application was read. This gives the impression of bias.
- Tracking progress and outcomes of zoning requests is hindered by deferments.

### Suggestions

- Establish reasonable time limits for presentations by both applicants and opponents.
- Provide more detail on the agenda, including the location and purpose of the project, and have copies of the agenda available at the meeting.

## III. First Amendment

### County Council

- Sessions open with recitation of the Lord's Prayer.
- Suggestion that County Calendar refer to a Spring break rather than Easter was derided.
- The Ten Commandments are posted in the Council Chamber.

### Suggestions

- Open meetings with a non-sectarian prayer or a moment of silence.
- Use the term Spring Holiday as the school systems do, instead of a religious holiday.

#### IV. Environment and Energy Conservation

##### County Council

- New county constructed buildings are built to conserve energy.
- Recognized need for safety standards and inspection of windmills.
- Continued conflict with DNREC over wetland buffers
- Continued approval of development in environmentally sensitive developing areas.

##### Suggestions

- Comply with State plans for environmentally sensitive areas.
- Follow Preliminary Land Use recommendations.
- Develop enforceable ordinances for windmill safety.

#### V. Land Use and Affordable Housing

##### County Council

- Some effort to promote affordable housing, but location was in a “brownfield”.
- Conditional Use in AR-1 appears to be “spot zoning”.
- There are no maps showing up to date approved development.

##### Suggestions

- Put zoning and development applications on-line.
- Develop and keep up-dated a map showing all developed land, land approved for development, land that has been approved but on which development is deferred with tracking of expired approvals . This map should be readily available to the public as well as officials.
- Educate the public to the definition of “affordable” housing.
- At hearings, Commissioners and Council Members need to be especially discriminating and probe for the truth about what is being presented.

Examples of effective government were observed such as using Federal stimulus funds for sewer projects and the move to record deeds electronically. The Council showed the ability to do creative problem solving, coming up with win/win solutions on occasion.

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

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League of Women Voters, Sussex County