

League of Women Voters, Sussex County

Report to County Council

In honor of Sunshine Day

March 20, 2012

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 third year of activity. Observers attend County Council, Planning and Zoning Commission, and Board of Adjustment meetings. Reports from the Observers are compiled into monthly reports and submitted to the Board of the League of Women Voters of Sussex County.

Between February, 2011, and January, 2012, League of Women Voters' Observers attended 83% of County Council meetings, 26% of the meetings of the Planning and Zoning Commission and 23% of the meetings of the Board of Adjustments. This report is a compilation of the major reported issues and concerns from the past year as viewed by the Observers and that relate to positions of the League of Women Voters.

Highlights:

- 1. The granting of time extensions to developers whose projects were expiring.**
LWV opposed making such a decision without adequate information as to the number and type of projects involved. This led to a Freedom of Information request for a listing of these projects. The difficulty in retrieving this information revealed the need for a more efficient system of record keeping. It also prompted changes by the County in responding to FOIA requests. The administrative decision to prioritize the implementation of computerization of planning and zoning records was another positive outcome, although it is not clear what the status of this implementation is at this point.
LWVUS- Protect the citizen's right to know and facilitate citizen participation in government decision making.
- 2. Police training for sheriff's deputies.**
LWVDE holds the position that row offices should be removed from the election process and their functions moved to the appropriate state or local administrative agency.
- 3. Redistricting**
The LWV of Sussex County held workshops throughout the County, obtaining community input into the development of a map that met the requirements for establishing new councilmanic districts and presented this to the County Council. The LWV submitted testimony regarding the Sussex County redistricting plan.

Although the League has concerns about how the criteria for the County's redistricting map were developed, we recognize the process to be an improvement in terms of openness and citizen involvement from previous years.

LWVDE- Reapportionment/Redistricting- Support for an open unbiased process for reapportionment and redistricting with opportunities for public participation

LWVUS- Independent commission for reapportionment/redistricting.

4. **Public Facilities Ordinance**

The LWV supports such an ordinance, which would promote growth while ensuring that adequate infrastructure is in place. There was initial discussion of this topic in 2010 at which there was the promise of a workshop on the subject. In September, an ordinance was introduced, but withdrawn until a workshop could be held. To date, more than four months later, the workshop has not been scheduled.

LWVDE- Support of the regulation of growth and optimum use of land through comprehensive planning policy.

5. **Wetland Buffers**

The courts have decided that Sussex County does not have to comply with the recommendations of Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) regarding the width of buffers to protect wetlands. The LWV, however, continues to support the DNREC regulations to protect the environment and wildlife and communities from flooding.

LWVDE- Critical land areas- support for preservation and/or protection of certain critical areas (ecologically fragile estuaries and coastal areas, farmland, aquifers, floodplain, and natural areas).

LWVUS- Environmental Protection and Pollution Control: Preserve the physical, chemical and biological integrity of the ecosystem, with maximum protection of public health and the environment.

In addition, among the recommendations listed in our report for last year are these that continue to be issues:

1. **Hire a Certified County Planner**- with a salary, job scope and authority appropriate for a professional. This position differs from that of the Director of Planning and Zoning.

This has not been done. The position has been vacant for more than two years.

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 the site plans, etc.

There has been some improvement in making agendas available at County Council meetings and, only occasionally, supplemental material is distributed. We recommend that such material be posted on the web site along with the agenda. Agendas are not reliably available at Planning and Zoning and Board

of Adjustment meetings. Land use agenda items should include the specific address, clearly identifying the location.

3. Officials should make sure that they can be heard by the audience in the chamber and online.

This continues to be an issue. Officials should also refrain from conducting side conversations.

Additional Observations: Regarding issues where the LWV does not have specific positions.

1. We have been favorably impressed by the fiscal management of the County.
2. County employees are polite and helpful.
3. The emergency management services are state of the art both in equipment and care for health emergencies and disasters.
4. County sewer expansion appears to be efficient and an asset to the community.
5. Citizens at public meetings are treated respectfully.

Conclusion:

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

Carole Somers
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League of Women Voters of Sussex County