



League of Women Voters, Sussex County

Report to County Council

Sunshine Day – Spring 2015

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 sixth 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 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.

HIGHLIGHTS:

1. Water Problems.

- While we remain concerned about water quality standards in the Chesapeake watershed, we are pleased to note that the Sussex County plan for future sewer plant expansions and services is ahead of schedule.

2. Planning

- For several years, our annual reports to the Council have noted the critical need for a certified, professional land use planner to provide expert guidance on decisions related to land use. We are very pleased that a planning and zoning manager has been hired and congratulate the Council on this important accomplishment. We anticipate that the addition of this position will result in the provision of clear and accurate information regarding the impact of proposed development on infrastructure issues in the county.
- Concerns have been expressed regarding the county's vigilance in monitoring the implementation of approved development plans to ensure that they comply with what has been approved. To preserve the integrity of the planning approval process, it is essential that projects ultimately comply with details in the plan originally approved.

- We note the hiring of a new Chief Constable with responsibility for investigating public complaints and enforcing the County Code as it relates to zoning issues. This position will be an asset in respect to Code enforcement.
- We believe that the development of a carrying-capacity study to provide guidance for decisions related to land use holds promise as a tool for future decision-making.

3. Citizens' Right to Know/Citizen Participation.

- During the course of this year, we noted our concern that the opportunity for public comment at County Council meetings had been moved to a time after the executive session, seriously limiting the opportunity for citizens to meaningfully comment on matters before the Council. We note that this procedure has been changed to include a Public Comment session at the beginning of the meeting. While this represents an improvement in providing an opportunity for input by the public, we are concerned that members of the public who wish to comment on matters presented at that meeting have no opportunity to comment on such matters until the following Council meeting. We feel that reinstating the public comment session to its previous place on the agenda, before the executive sessions, would provide more meaningful access for public participation in County Council meetings.
- We continue to observe violations of the Rules of Procedure of the Sussex County Council in respect to conduct during meetings. We have observed the failure to ask for recognition of the President of the Council before speaking, side conversations, and interruptions of one another. We also request that the Council members make every effort to use amplification available in the Chambers so that the public can readily hear all statements made by Council members.
- We would like to compliment the Planning and Zoning Commission on the structure and tenor of their meetings. Questioning of applicants is done in an orderly and respectful way, and ample time is provided for public input immediately following each public hearing.

Additional Observations:

- County employees are consistently polite and helpful in their responsiveness to us and to other citizens.
- We continue to be favorably impressed by the fiscal management of the County. However, the practice of having individual accounts for granting monetary requests raises questions of the appropriateness of this practice. Decisions about how these taxpayer funds are disbursed appear arbitrary.
- The LWVSC appreciates the years of support given to it in publication of the “They Represent You” guide to elected officials and government offices. The County has now decided to publish its own version of a guide and we are pleased to note that it is now available to the public.
- We would like to thank the Planning and Zoning Office and Commissioners for inviting our League Observer to join them on a tour of the Americana Bayside Community on October 3, 2014. The tour provided insight into the issues faced by the developer of a large community during an economic downturn, and the rationale for requesting plan amendments to resolve unforeseen issues.

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