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Guest commentary: In 2008, local women need to exercise right to vote

CHRIS STRATON, Special to the Daily News

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Aug. 26 marks the 87th anniversary of the day that the U.S. Constitution was amended to grant women the right to vote. This anniversary of the 19th Amendment, Women's Equality Day, provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the progress made on voting rights in the past 87 years. Women fought long and hard for the right to vote. Would the original suffragettes be proud of where we are today?

Collier County had 186,140 eligible voters in the 2006 general election, and 53 percent of them were women.

With women representing the majority of voters, why are there so few elected officials that are women (one of five county commissioners; one of five constitutional officers; three of five School Board members; one in six county judges; three in nine circuit judges)?

With Collier County's less-than 50 percent voter turnout rate, we should all be ashamed. But with men at a higher voting rate (48 percent) than women (46 percent), women should be especially ashamed.

Women's Equality Day is a time to celebrate the progress achieved by active women over the past eight decades, but it is also a time to look to what still needs to be done to make democracy work for all Americans.

While the League of Women Voters' founding mission was to educate women about their newly-granted right to vote, through time the mission has expanded to encourage our informed and active participation in government, to increase understanding of major public policy issues and to influence public policy through education and advocacy.

The Collier County League's focus in 2008 will be to register voters, but more importantly to encourage voters to actually utilize their right to vote. Our goal is to improve voter turnout in all the 2008 elections.

There are simply no acceptable excuses for not voting.

Out of town or not able to drive? Call 774-8450 or go to www.colliervotes.com to request an absentee ballot.

Too busy on Election Day? Take advantage of early voting at eight locations throughout Collier County.

Not informed enough about the candidates or issues? Attend a candidate forum, read the local newspapers or go to www.lwvcolliercounty.org to get objective information about the candidates and the issues.

Jan. 29, 2008, will be Collier County's first election of this season. In addition to being Florida's

presidential preference primary, this election provides your opportunity to vote on a proposed constitutional amendment to change Save Our Homes in the name of property tax reform.

To vote on Jan. 29, you must be registered to vote by Dec. 31.

Go to www.lwvcolliercounty.org or www.colliervotes.com to get a registration form.

It is crucial that we continue to engage more citizens in the democratic process, on every level. Citizens volunteering, educating, lobbying — these are absolutely necessary to democracy, and we need to see more of it.

The League of Women Voters will continue to be the place where hands-on work leads to a better democracy for all. Membership in the League is open to men and women of all ages.

Call me at 263-4656 or e-mail me at President@lwvcolliercounty.org if you want to help make democracy work in Collier County.

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Chris Straton, of Naples, is president of the League of Women Voters of Collier County.

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