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### **Guest commentary: Commission must seriously consider redrawing Collier district boundaries**

Chris Straton - President, League of Women Voters of Collier County

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At the beginning of the public petition portion of the Jan. 9 Collier County Commission meeting, Chairman Jim Coletta said, "The public petition process is a wonderful thing. It gives the public the ability to come directly to their commissioners for whatever situations they would like to bring to them."

The League of Women Voters of Collier County agrees. We have been an active champion of openness in government throughout our history, and we appreciate the county commissioners making the public petition process available.

But we were dismayed at the lack of response of the board to one of the petitions made at that meeting.

Here's what happened:

A public petitioner (Chuck Mohlke, chair of the Collier County Democratic Party) addressed the board on the subject of County Commission district boundaries.

He reviewed the fact that the board can only adjust district boundaries to account for uneven population growth among the districts in odd-numbered years. He reminded commissioners of their discussion in September 2005 about the possible need to redraw district lines given the significant growth in population in the preceding five years.

He reminded them that at that time there was a difference of over 19,000 persons between the most-populated County Commission district and the least-populated district. And he suggested that this disparity probably approximated 30,000 persons today.

He explained that residents in districts that have had greater growth have less voting power than those whose districts have had less growth, and he said this raises a question of fairness and equity: "If you live in a very populated district, your vote counts less than if you live in a less populated district."

And he asked the commission to get the facts: Find out what effect population growth has had on commission district populations, and decide, based on the facts and professional recommendations, whether or not to adjust district boundaries to provide more equal district populations before the 2008 elections.

How did the commissioners respond to the petitioner's request? Did they agree that this is a matter of fairness and equity, and direct staff to do as he asked? Did they agree to place the item on the agenda for discussion at an upcoming meeting — as they did with the first public petitioner that day? Did they commend him for his initiative, offer to contribute personally to the cause and ask for a membership application — as one commissioner did in response to the second petitioner's request for \$150,000 of county funding? Or compliment him on his efforts on behalf of the community, and agree to his request

for a fee waiver — as with the third petitioner?

No. The board chairman simply said, "Thank you, sir. Appreciate your time."

No questions from a single board member.

No discussion.

End of subject.

The League of Women Voters of Collier County is a nonpartisan political organization and this is not a partisan issue, despite having been raised by the chairman of a political party. This is about the fair and equitable representation of the people of Collier County.

The League of Women Voters of Collier County supports single-member election districts that are equal in population, as we wrote in a letter to the commission in support of this petition. In our letter, we urged the commission to direct staff to bring back a proposal to amend the district boundaries to reflect an equitable distribution of population based upon current estimates.

Yes, the public petition process is a "wonderful thing," but not when the commission refuses to engage in a discussion of the petitioner's request.

This matter deserves serious consideration by our elected officials. With the growth this county has experienced and will experience in the future, Collier County's residents should not have to wait until the next mandatory census in 2010 to have our county's voting districts redrawn. Our citizens are being unfairly represented now.

We urge Collier County residents to call their commissioners at 774-8097 or e-mail them through their Web site at [www.colliergov.net](http://www.colliergov.net) and ask for fair representation.

For more information, contact the League of Women Voters of Collier County at 263-4656 or [lwvcc@lwvcolliercounty.org](mailto:lwvcc@lwvcolliercounty.org).

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