

Guest commentary: Tallahassee tally ... League of Women Voters' perspective

SANDY PARKER / President, League of Women Voters, Collier County
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One of the many valuable contributions the League of Women Voters makes is at the state level, especially during legislative session. This year, the Florida League made more of a difference by helping keep bad legislation from passing than by advancing our own priorities in the areas of state government, education and social policy. But this type of contribution is also important to the quality of our democracy.

Here is a report on some of the areas the Florida League worked on this past legislative session. For a more detailed report, go to www.LWVFLA.org and click on "Capitol Report."

Election law

The league protects the right of all citizens to vote and encourages citizens to vote. Legislation filed during the session to facilitate early voting was supported by the league, the Supervisor of Elections Association, the governor and other groups. The league worked to advance this bill, but unfortunately, it didn't go anywhere.

Then there was a late-filed bill which would harm third-party voter registration, reduce the acceptable forms of ID, place additional restrictions on those who register by mail, and require anyone moving within 28 days of an election to take additional steps for their vote to count. In addition, the bill would weaken campaign finance rules. Unlike the good election bill we worked for, this bill moved swiftly through the Senate with limited opportunities for the public to speak. Fortunately, due to efforts on the part of a broad coalition including the league, this bill was stopped.

The league supports public financing of campaigns of candidates for elective statewide office who agree to campaign spending limits because it reduces the influence of special-interest money and provides opportunities for more candidates to participate. Despite league opposition, a constitutional amendment to repeal the Florida Election Campaign Financing Act will appear on the 2010 ballot. We will be working against this effort next year.

Finance and taxation

The league supports a state fiscal structure that is equitable in its distribution of the tax responsibility and responsive to public needs. As such we urged that all current sales-tax exemptions be reviewed for possible elimination. We were pleased that both the House and Senate finance and tax councils began reviews of these exemptions. But when the council members reported back, only a few eliminations were recommended, and none of those recommendations was adopted.

Ultimately, to bridge the budget gap, the House and Senate raised fees on services such as driver's licenses, title transfers, court fees, university students and fishing licenses. Some of

these fees more than double the current fees and several are for items that seniors and low-income families cannot do without.

The league also lobbied to close an existing loophole in Florida's tax system that allows companies to assign business profit gained in Florida to other states, thereby avoiding Florida taxation. Unfortunately, this effort to bring more tax revenue to the state did not succeed. However, another bill the league supported to begin to address depreciation-related corporate tax loopholes was successful.

Redistricting

In 2010 there will be a new census and congressional and state House and Senate districts will be redrawn (redistricting) to reflect the new population count. Currently it is the responsibility of the Florida Legislature to draw these new district boundaries. It is to the advantage of the party in power to redraw boundaries to ensure their re-election, which is known as "gerrymandering."

The league supports single-member election districts that are equal in population, provide access for minorities, are compact and, when possible, take local characteristics such as political and geographical boundaries into consideration. A bill that would create an independent commission to set up redistricting plans was filed in the Senate. This bill addressed many of the league's concerns about the current redistricting process, but unfortunately didn't go anywhere. Since we have been unsuccessful in making this change legislatively, we will continue to collect signatures to place this initiative on the ballot in 2010. For more information about this effort and to sign the petitions, go to www.FairDistrictsFlorida.org.

Get involved

Bottom line: If you care about these issues and want to support our efforts to make changes in Tallahassee, contact the League of Women Voters of Collier County at (239) 263-4656 or lwwcc@lwwcolliercounty.org. To learn more about the league, go to www.lwwcolliercounty.org.