

The Houston VOTER

League of Women Voters-Houston Area • December 2008

December General Meeting *Meet & Greet Our Newly Elected Officials*

Friday • December 12

Doubletree Hotel

400 Dallas Street

Register: 11:30 a.m.

Lunch begins: 12:00 noon

\$30 per person

**Make your reservations early by sending
a check or call the LWV office with credit card
info - 713/784-2923. Deadline - December 9.**

December General Meeting Meet and greet our newly elected officials

The November ballot contained a lengthy list of candidates. We now have the opportunity to meet and greet our newly elected officials. Do come and bring your friends. Bring a friend; this is a good way to introduce people to the League!

Call the LWV-HA office at 713-784-2923 as early as possible to make your reservations. The deadline is Tuesday, December 9.

Interested?

By Barb Swartz

Do you want to be a part of decision making for the League? Would you like to be on the inside and help formulate League policy? Or maybe you know someone who would.

The LWV-Houston Area Nominating Committee is looking for some good women or men to be a part of the 2009-2010 League Board. This is not a titular position. Each board member has a job to do and is a vital part of the League.

So don't be shy, let us know of your interest. Share your expertise. Call or email one of us—we're in the book. Chair Millie Whittington, Joan Golding, Barb Swartz, Bee Franks-Walker, Gwen Essinger.

President's Message

By Laura Blackburn

Our political world is turning in a new direction, which means easier challenges for the LWV in some ways and harder challenges in others. However, as always, I think the new Congress and new Texas Legislature will be ready for us! I hope you enjoyed both the general meeting and units on advocacy—and are ready to join us in influencing our elected officials—both new and returning!



Please join us for our December 12 holiday luncheon featuring our newly-elected state and county office holders. It is always festive and, of course, a wonderful opportunity to congratulate and to get to know all those newly-elected and eager officials! Let them hear from you.

I hope all of you have wonderful holidays!



LWV-HA VP-Community Relations Lula Blake and Daniella Guzman of KPRC-TV Channel 2 in the TV studios on Election Day.

INSIDE

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- No Unit Meetings

... and more

The LWV-HA Observers

Houston City Council

Shirley Gibson Reporting

October 8, 2008

The Council came together to have their group picture made before the Council Session so I took this opportunity to hand out Voters Guides to the Mayor and Councilmembers. They all were appreciative and commended the League for the good work. The pictures will be good because all the council had big genuine smiles that radiated across their faces.

The Mayor's Report, the first item on the agenda, included a report on the signal lights that were now repaired and the debris removal which produced more than the estimated 5,000,000 cubic yards predicted.

The issue of the damage to the city facilities was brought up by Councilmember Khan. Mayor White responded that we had damage and the city was expediting the reimbursement for damages by both the insurance companies and FEMA.

After the Mayor's Report Councilmember Sullivan brought the issue of ordinance 16 on the agenda. He said that roofers couldn't afford the Completed Operation Insurance required by the city when registering as a roofer in the City of Houston. He said that over regulation prevented businesses from having the opportunity to succeed in the fair market. Mayor White responded that we all have a fear of being ripped off and the registration of roofers is an effort to provide the homeowner information about the roofer he is about to do business with. It also provides the state attorney general's office information to prosecute the roofer if he does not live up to his word.

A speaker from the city said that the contractors in every field need to have permits but that also roofers need to be registered for the city to gain vital information about all roofers coming into our city to do business. It is important to have on file a record of their insurance.

October 22, 2008

The council meeting began with a legal hearing to determine just and reasonable retail water and sewer rates of Southern Water Corporation #2008-760. There was a court reporter and an expert witness, Alfred Morgan, Regularity Expert, who was sworn in to give testimony. He began by reading exhibits presented by Southern Water as to their financial information. Mr. Morgan said that the proposed water and sewer rates were 46% for water and 56% for sewer. He said that after taxes 12% was the return on equity and 16.08% before taxes. The capital structure was 65% equity and 35% debt. The cost of debt is 25%. Cash on hand is 1.4 million.

Councilmember Lawrence wanted to know the population make up as to residential or business. Mr. Morgan said that it was 95% residential. She wanted to know about how they had maintained infrastructure. The mayor responded that the Southern Water Corporation is one of the better Water Corporations providing water in the city area. Ms. Lawrence

Harris County Commissioners Court

By Sharon and Harold Friedman

The subject of the contract deputy program came up. This program has been going on for many years and allows special groups such as MUDs, school districts, and homeowners' associations to have sheriffs or constable deputies spend a great deal of their time patrolling these areas and others not noted. They do pay for a portion of the law enforcer's salaries and expenses. How much seems to be a mystery and is being studied. What doesn't have to be studied is that an entity who can't afford this extra care isn't getting it. Are they happy; no!!

An ethics definition, according to Webster's Dictionary, is conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession or group. County Judge Emmett gave a talk saying that those working for Harris County were very ethical people. He has had a group of citizens studying ethics in government. They were trying to ascertain if more legislation is needed to set up standards. It was said by several commissioners that Harris County has some standards set up, and these are used.

A change in contract with Southwest Signal Supply, Inc. was approved for maintenance of traffic signal systems, and related devices in the county, resulting in an addition of \$41,272 to the contract amount.

Authorization was given to the Sheriff to accept grant funds of \$100,000 from the Texas Department of State Health Services for the Early Medical Intervention Program to provide HIV/AIDs services to individuals in custody.

wants to add standards to any ordinance asking for a rate increase so this matter of infrastructure will be addressed.

Councilmember Clutterbuck was concerned that no one from Southern Water was there to speak to the rate increase. She also wanted to know if the city had tried to purchase this corporation.

The mayor said that it was not for sale and we normally don't purchase a water company because it causes the city to go in and make several infrastructure changes.

The question came back to why the corporation wanted such a large increase? The reason given was they waited years to ask for an increase and they had such difficulty in 1993 that they are just now coming back. Mr. Morgan said that he was in the process of drafting an ordinance for this increase.

The council discussed the fact that the Water Corporation would go to the TCEQ to appeal a decision to turn down the increase if that is how the council should vote. The Mayor said that the City could participate in the appeal to the TCEQ. Councilmember Green asked if there were large businesses also in this District. Mr. Morgan replied that there was one school and a strip shopping center.

The mayor was asked if the city had the power to determine the rate structure of water companies within the city. The mayor responded that he thought that they did.

Councilmember Clutterbuck pointed out that we have an ordinance against signs that cause inordinate attention so we can charge roofers whose trucks have conspicuous signs.

continued on page 6

LWVHEF Sponsors 7 Debates this Election Cycle

By Ann Wood

The Houston Area League of Women Voters and HoustonPBS teamed up to present an unprecedented round of political debates to help create a more informed and educated electorate. **Red, White and Blue: The Great Debate Series 2008** brought a total of 7 candidate debates to local and state audiences. The series began with **2008 Texas Supreme Court Forum** presented by the South Texas College of law and sponsored by the League of Women Voters Houston Education Fund, American Board of Trial Advocates - Houston Chapter, Houston Trial Lawyers Association and HoustonPBS. This live debate among the candidates for three Supreme Court positions including that of Chief Justice brought all 6 candidates before a large crowd of lawyers, law students and interested citizens to observe one of only 2 state-wide debates for these races.

A second debate, broadcast state-wide and live, featured the three candidates for US Senate. The Republican incumbent John Cornyn, Democratic candidate Rick Noriega and Libertarian candidate Yvonne Schick faced questions from a panel of three interviewers in a traditional debate format of question, answer, and rebuttal. David Jones, Gary Polland and R.G. Radcliffe peppered the candidates with a wide range of questions intended to explore the candidates' views on issues important to Texas voters including immigration, the Iraq War, the current economic crisis and mandatory sentencing for drug offenders. This too was one of only 2 opportunities voters had to see these candidates meet head-to-head. Leaguers Barbara Swartz, Betty Oertel, Ann Wood and Georgia Richardson served as timers and neutral observers for the debate and enjoyed the opportunity to observe the candidates up close.

The rest of the series were 30-minute informal debates taped for local broadcast every Friday night during October. Candidates for the positions of State Senate District 11, U.S. Representative District 22, Harris County Sheriff, County Judge, and District Attorney faced "Red, White



At the Supreme Court Debate, left to right, Ernie Manouse of Channel 8, Ann Wood, and Dr. James Alfini, President & Dean of South Texas College of Law.

and Blue" hosts David Jones and Gary Polland questions. A further debate is planned between candidates in a potential run-off race for Texas Senate District 17.

Our League can be very proud of the depth and breadth of its debate series this election cycle. Working with our partners at HoustonPBS we managed to bring broad exposure to important races and helped prepare many voters for the decisions they made on November 4. We also learned a great deal about how important debate is in a democracy and how difficult it can be to get candidates to participate. We thank every candidate

who showed up for making time to talk to voters about the issues. Those who would ask for our vote of confidence in their ability to represent us should be willing to come before us and publicly answer our questions. You can see every one of these debates on the web at www.houstonpbs.org under local programming, Red, White and Blue.

Many thanks also go out to Ernie Manouse, producer of "Red, White and Blue" and HoustonPBS for working so hard under difficult "Ike-related" conditions to bring **Great Debate 2008** to the public.

October General Meeting



Above left - Marlene Gafrick and David Kahne take questions from the audience, with LWV-HA President Laura Blackburn looking on. Above right - LWV-HA Executive Director Pat Downing welcomes the audience.

**Will you be the one who enlists
Houston member #500? Ask a friend to join!**

Advocacy

By Jan Wilbur

Redistricting – redrawing the boundaries of legislative and congressional districts – normally occurs every ten years following the decennial census. Typically, the political party in the majority in the Legislature gerrymanders the districts to protect its incumbents and to create as many “safe” districts for its party as possible.

Sometimes, as it did in Texas in 2003, the minority party becomes the majority party in the Legislature and redraws the districts anew to suit its needs. The 2003 map of districts defies description. For instance, one Congressional district stretches from northwest Harris County through Brenham to the north and west of Austin. How can one member of Congress adequately represent such a wide spectrum of constituent needs?

Not only is such frequent redistricting a hardship for the voter who may find herself in this district, and then that district, and then in the other district in a very short period of time but also it wastes the time of the legislators who should be looking after the interests of all Texans instead of protecting their incumbency.

Now, if you are in the majority party you may well think this is just fine and a fair way to do redistricting. But the League believes there is a better way. We support an independent redistricting commission, which should be appointed, bipartisan, small in size, and composed of an odd number of members. The commission should operate within a short, strict time frame to produce a map, which would then be submitted to the state legislature for its approval.

Further, criteria for drawing district boundaries should, among other things, be contiguous and compact and should not give consideration to retention of incumbents or political party strength.

I ask you; does the word “lobbyist” leave a bad taste in your mouth? Well, it shouldn’t. Lobbyists are important in educating legislators about the needs of the citizens they represent and how the bill under consideration will affect their constituents. There are good lobbyists and there are bad

More Parks for Houston!

By Alice May Berthelsen

The Harris County Flood Control District is limited in their activities on flood mitigation. However, by working with the City of Houston, Harris County, and Texas Parks and Wildlife, several new parks have been added to our area. Two are Keith-Weiss Park and Brays Bayou Marsh at Mason Park; added Willow Waterhole and Art Storey Park are wonderful additions. Harris County will always be susceptible to floods; these efforts are making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear! The Flood District has been very responsive to citizen action and our desire for more trees, trails, and amenities around our bayous!

lobbyists. Bad lobbyists (often well funded) operate unfairly, unethically and sometimes illegally. Good lobbyists operate fairly, ethically, and for a public good.

Here’s where you come in. The League is a grassroots organization, which means our most valuable resource is our grassroots – our members. We don’t have major dollars but we do have committed members – and you are our lobby corps. You don’t have to register as a lobbyist because you are not getting paid. But I ask you right now to sit down and write your state Senator and your state Representative and congratulate them on winning their election and lobby them to support an independent redistricting commission (and maybe wish them Happy Holidays, too). Thanks for being a good lobbyist and supporting a public good. (And Happy Holidays.)

Does the word “lobbyist” leave a bad taste in your mouth? It shouldn’t.

If we do it right, 2009 can be the year redistricting gets a new, bipartisan overhaul in Texas.

Redistricting comes up every ten years - plus every time the political majority in the Texas Legislative houses changes in between. We can’t afford to be bored by the subject or disheartened by our lack of success in changing the rules in Texas. We need a fair way to

Police Advisory Commission

By Barb Swartz

The October meeting began with a presentation by Ms. Cooper, Executive Director of Target Hunger. She told of their work noting that each month they serve 9,000 individuals through their food pantries, senior day sites, and home delivery. They also provide programs to their clients to help them become self-sufficient. She stated that one-third of households have had trouble buying groceries at least one time in the past year; 37 percent of those had difficulty buying groceries at least once a month.

Then Chief Ottmeier gave the report in place of Chief Hurtt. He gave crime statistics through August of this year. Violent crime is up 6 percent, nonviolent is down 98 percent; total crime is down 7 percent citywide. The ratio of nonviolent to violent crime is 4:1.

He then reported on activities during Hurricane Ike. There was no mass looting. The department went into full mobilization before the storm hit, then officers spent 12 hour shifts each day; many of them had storm damage in their homes. During the period Sept. 12-26, there were 1300 tickets for curfew violations, the activity that received the most attention. Of 417 arrests, 52 percent had criminal histories. The average arrest figure was 330 per day, down 10 percent from a normal time. He said that Chief Hurtt was extremely proud of his organization during that time.

**Democracy is
NOT a
Spectator Sport!**

redraw the borders of our political districts. We also need a way to save our elected officials the waste of time and our state the embarrassment of ridiculous and ugly squabbling over redistricting.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dec. 3	VOTER Deadline
Dec. 12	General Meeting, 11:00 a.m. (see page 1)
Dec. 17	VOTER Mailing
Dec. 19	Board Meeting, League office, 10 a.m.
Dec. 24-26	Office Closed

Thanks to the following for their contributions:

Paul & Margaret Kolodzie
Barbara Bartholomew
Honorable Beverly Kaufman
Carolyn Hunnicutt-Armijo
Vicki Huff
Margie Hartrick
Dorcas Hand
Merilee Phorman
Leslie Taylor
Arthurlene T. Jackson

December Unit Meetings

Units do not meet this month. Many of them have special events instead. Call the Unit Leader for information.

Southwest Day

Rhoda Haddox
(713)667-5952

Spring Branch

Kay Guenther
713-464-6870

West Harris Co.

Joan Golding
(281)596-0935

Midwest

Yvette Calloway
(713)747-6555
Millie Whittington
(281)752-0446

Citywide Evening

Jackie Friedman
(713)521-0702

New Member Unit

Judy Hollinger
(713)665-4458

We welcome these new and returning members:

Jacqueline McCoy

Kathryn Ley

Jeremy S. Davis

Nancy A. Lockwood

Janet Donalson

Bonnie New

Ms. Robin Eisen

Leticia Ozcelik

Kathryn Griffin

Ralph J. Polley

Jeanne D. Lelley

Do you search the web?
Here's a way to help the League.

Use
www.Goodsearch.com
and enter
League of Women Voters
as the charity,
then search away.

Each time, the National League
receives a small contribution.

Winter Travel with the League

These tours benefit
participating State and Local Leagues
Make sure you are participating!

www.travelwiththeleague.com
or call 1-800-762-4216

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City Hall Observers

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She doesn't want an ordinance that penalizes legitimate workers. "People should ask for their references and check the information. If we register the roofers, people will have a false sense of security about them which we can't provide."

Councilmember Lawrence voiced similar concerns. She said that there are no teeth to the ordinance. "What are we going to do? Slap their hands?"

The Mayor replied that we will have information to give the attorney general. The conversation continued with three more councilmembers, Holms, Khan, and Green also not liking the ordinance. The roofer's organization of Houston spoke in favor, but it is tagged for now.

October 29, 2008

The Houston City Council gathered at 9:30 AM and the agenda was handled by 10:00 AM.

Several interesting things came

up in the session when each council member speaks.

The Step out and Walk for Disabilities will be held in Minute Maid Park on November 22 and the firefighters had a mass at the Co-Cathedral.

Councilmember Garcia spoke about the fact that 90 trees had been planted in District H.

Councilmembers Lawrence and Clutterbuck mentioned the Kiss the Pig contest that the city was having to raise money for charity.

Several Councilmembers brought up the recent drowning of a toddler in an apartment pool and how this could be prevented. A suggestion was made that a hot line be established so someone in the apartment complex could report fences down or other hazards for children.

All members were hoping that inspections could be stepped up or more inspectors be hired.

**Pick a unit –
attend and participate.**

Do we have your email address?

If we don't, please email it to us at lwv@lwvhouston.org.

More and more of LWV-Houston communications and notices are being sent via mass email. If we don't have your email address, you may not be receiving this information. You may have joined and not given us your email address, or maybe you got an email address after you joined.

Don't miss out on important League information. Laura Blackburn emails her President's Message every Friday, and email reminders are sent for monthly events such as the general meetings. If you have an email address and are not receiving these notices, then we don't have your address.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization which promotes informed and active participation of citizens in government.

The League does not support or oppose any political party or candidate.