



The Houston VOTER
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The Houston VOTER

League of Women Voters • Houston Area • January 2009

President's Message

By JoAnn Henshaw

Happy New Year! Three great holidays were joyful. And one we had a nice year which included a new president, a new state legislative year and new programs for the LWVUSA. The League's Great Meeting at the HHSO Convention, as you can see, and the topic is local program planning. Included with this mailing is a copy of our local resolutions and each of us that we can develop a position and take action. Last year we chose two: (1) a study of homecare alternatives and (2) a study of building codes in coastal areas. We now have a position on homecare alternatives, and our study of building codes is under way in underway. I encourage you to come to this important meeting. I promise a lively discussion of local issues!

January General Meeting Local Program Planning A Dinner Meeting

Thursday,
 January 8, 2009
 5:00pm - 9:00pm

The Briar Club
 2645 Briarwood

The cost is \$35.
 Reservations required. Mail a check
 or call with credit card number.

January General Meeting Program Planning for 2009

Each year at its Annual Meeting in May, Houston Area League members choose their program for the following year. Local program includes issues for new study as well as issues from our ongoing program on which members wish the League to take action.

But you can't wait until May to prepare each study or action item. Program planning for 2009 will be completed at the January General Meeting in order to be considered for action at the next meeting in May. Whether it is air quality, floodplain, city budget, homecare alternatives, TB20, libraries, occupational planning, storm ponds, toxic substances, transportation, domestic violence, health, or education or some new item that should be on the League's program agenda for 2009-2010.

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- Openings
- Education Report
- LWV Meeting & Conventions and more

January Unit Meetings

Thursday, Jan. 15
Houston, 10 a.m.
 Gerald Wiersch, building
 8412 Alameda
 Tracie Callaway
 (713) 947-8223
 4830 Westinghouse
 (281) 792-8444

Saturday, Jan. 17
New Member Unit, 10 a.m.
 League office
 3601 Houston Ave., #228
 Holly Hutchins
 (713) 668-4508

**Pick a unit!
 Attend
 and
 Participate!**

Monday, Jan. 19

Southwest Day, 7 p.m.
 Abel Library
 7879 South Kirbywood
 Abilene, Texas
 (713) 467-5840

West Harris Co., 8:30 p.m.
 Maple Trails, 4447 HWY 417
 Angleton, Texas
 (281) 946-0810

Citizens Evening, 8 p.m.
 Black Lab Pub
 1300 Montrose
 Jackie Finkola
 (713) 621-0702

Tuesday, Jan. 20
Spring Branch, 9:30 a.m.
 Home of Betty Mackey
 4029 Kermanshah Lane
 Bay Greenlee
 (713) 991-0875

Questions for January Unit Meetings

Please read the enclosed Facts & Issues on Transportation prepared by Mike Whittington. Please come to your unit meeting prepared to discuss the following questions.

1. Is there any part of the LWVUS investigation Position that is not clear to you?
2. The League position does not discuss the current status of some to receive private telephone for children born of illegal immigrants. The fundamental principle that every child born in the US is a citizen is part of the US Constitution. What is your view?
3. Is a typical issue identified by participants covered by the position?
4. The LWVUS position supports a system for transnational immigrants already born to legal status by learning English, studying civics, and "working other relevant criteria." What should these criteria be?
5. What authority to immigration matters do states have? Should state and local governments be authorized to suspend deport illegal immigrants?
6. What are the benefits of immigration, legal and illegal? What are the disadvantages?

Advocacy in the 81st Legislature

Money, money, and money will be top three priorities for the 81st Legislature when it convenes in January, so said Rep. Scott Henshaw who spoke at the League's November General Meeting on Advocacy in the 81st Legislature.

When the Legislature voted to establish a business, tax in 2009 in order to provide property tax relief, budget analysts predicted that the amount of money raised would be significantly less than the property tax relief promised, resulting in a shortfall. Legislators who voted for the bill discussed the predicament, but it turned out the right action should be taken to correct the situation.

Scott Henshaw, the LWV, TX Chair for House Local Resolutions, came to town last night to tell us that the bill is not what we need. Our elected officials who could not be here, but are grateful for their effort and their presence. She explained the League's advocacy process.

Thirty-one program chairs from around the state, including from the Houston Area, Laura Henshaw, Air Quality, Marlene Lobbrecht, Early Childhood, and Mike Whittington, (immigration) received the bills in their area of

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The LWV-HA Observers

Houston City Council

Study Cities Meeting

November 12

Today the most prominent item was the ordinance governing the Attention Getting Devices that people place at their businesses. The council met in committee several times and appointed a board of concerned citizens to make a recommendation about this issue and to afford an the citizens of Houston. The committee spoke for the banning of Attention Getting Devices because of safety and other issues. Several attention getting device company members spoke against this ordinance because it appeared from the data that people are not adversely affected by the plates; they give to the devices. Several people from Science Houston spoke from the earlier and became aware view points. They wanted the attention getting devices gone.

Small business people spoke to the effect that these devices level the playing field for small businesses that can't afford expensive advertising. Finally it was brought up that this prohibition violated the first amendment rights of the business owner. The Mayor announced that it does not violate the first amendment rights since the devices have no sign on them to state an idea.

Councilmember Lovell said that the groups for the devices had ample opportunity to attend the committee meetings and have the opportunity of talking to each council member. Council member Noriega pointed out that it wasn't safety but aesthetics that the council and committee were opposed to. Councilmember Adams said the city was unable to enforce the ordinance that was on the books at the present and she asked what provisions the council was going to make to enforce this ordinance.

Mayor White suggested the council appoint an oversight committee to look into the matter. The discussion lasted three hours. The ordinance passed.

November 19

After a public hearing concerning land near the airport, the council moved on to the agenda and item 25 was taken out of order.

This ordinance concerned the large amount of money the city owns HUD. It seems that in repairing and building HUD funded housing before the present administration came to power there was shoddy workmanship and HUD is fining the city for this. The original amount was \$120 million. Since 2003 the city has been negotiating to reduce this fine. It is now 15.3 million and we are taking money out of TRBS to fund this debt. The council pointed out that this in no way limits the amount of money available for present day funding of low income housing.

The Mayor was adamant that no one be accused of

New Year - New Members - Ask a Friend to Join!

Harris County Commissioners Court

By Share and David Fradette

November 4

It is unusual at Commissioner's Court for several people to speak on a subject. A representative from TAMU, a large group of various religious groups, spoke about letting the sheriff's department in Harris County question prisoners at the jails about their citizenship. The immigration function is usually the job of the federal government. TAMU did not like this idea at all. They did not like the addition of this action that might terrorize those being held in jails. The sheriff's department would have their people trained by the immigration people to do the questioning. A member of the jailer's union was very much against the same issue. He felt that the responsibility for this should stay with the Federal Immigration Department. Commissioner Garcia wanted the also. Commissioner Radack felt the sheriff could take over this work in the county facilities with more people trained by the federal government. Commissioner Lee spoke saying he was skeptical of the idea. A vote was taken and the proposal went through a far as we could ascertain.

November 18

We could not get in this day as several officials were sworn in and the room was packed. We were in the board room so we could hear what was going on and the audio is much better in this room.

Then the fireworks began. The item was "Discussion and possible action to authorize the transfer of the Office of Legislative Relations and its budget from the County Attorney's Office to the County Judge's Office." County Judge Ennis said he spoke to Yance Ryan, recently elected to be County Attorney, and he said it seemed alright to him. Judge Ennis thought it would be wise to vote again this at the meeting this day since the legislators will meet early next year. Commissioners Lee and Garcia were against this vote before the County Attorney takes office. Commissioners Evenski and Radack wanted the vote to be taken immediately. The discussion was heated, but after all had voiced their opinions, the vote was delayed.

criminal negligence unless there is proof. He said that he is sure that this is a result of poor management and the lack of personnel to check on the workmanship. He believes in the future this problem can be rectified.

The next item for consideration was ordinance 41 concerning the red light violations caught on cameras. An expert was called to explain the way the violation works. The person runs the red light and it is caught on camera. It is not the offender but the vehicle that is caught. The owner of the vehicle is notified within five days. He is asked to take care of the violation in one of several ways. If no action occurs within 45 days, it is assumed he is guilty and a citation is issued. The citation is mailed to the address on record. This vehicle process takes 85 days. At the end of this time the car's owner will not be able to get a registration tag when it is due.

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Jan. 12	Office Closed
Jan. 8	General Meeting, Program Planning, 6:00 pm.
Jan. 15	Legislative Session begins
Jan. 11	Meeting, League office, 2 p.m.
Jan. 14	VOTER Deadline
Jan. 15-20	Union Immigration
Jan. 25	Board Meeting, League office, 10 a.m.
Jan. 26	VOTER Meeting

Thanks to the following for their contributions:

Robert G. Vanderwouter
 Tranchesi Nguyen & Lam Ovesk
 Suzanne S. Braden
 Mary Lou Burns
 Gwen Eshinger
 Trish Jones
 Pamela J. Zemann

League Legislative Advocacy

expertise, report on them in the Legislative Newsletter, and recommend when a Time for Action (TFA) either to support or in opposition to a particular bill is called for. The Austin Capital Corps attends legislative committee meetings and hearings and reports back to the appropriate program chair as the bills go through the process.

The Legislative Newsletter comes out every two weeks during the Legislative session and is sent to all League members in the state. (To see back issues of the Newsletter online, go to www.hvleague.org and click on Voter Info, and then Publications.)

When a local League receives a TFA, the League writes the official letter or email to all its legislators. League members are encouraged to write, email or call their individual representative in their own name not in the name of the League.

The Houston League Lobby Corps will be conducted by their Team Captain—Judy Fullinger for Government issues; Lewis Whittington for Administration of Justice; Gwen Escoger for Social Policy/Human Resources; and Alice May Berthelsen for National Resources—when a TFA has been sent that relates to an item under their program area. Lobby Corps members have committed to respond at least five times during the session, if called upon to do so.

Of course, all League members are encouraged to respond but we have established the Lobby Corps to be able to gather some statistics on how effective the League lobbying efforts are. If you have not been contacted to serve on the League Lobby Corps and would like to do so, please call the office of Jan Wilbur, 713-467-7289 or email at jawilbur@hvcouncil.org

We welcome these new and returning members:

Ida Averb	Dr. Linda Lee Novack
Pauline Arley	Roberta Hales
Terrie Davidson	Lois Mathis
Theresa & Judge Gene Jackson	Janis Vokory
Deak Lee & Traci Ann Nguyen	Leslie & Ben Viet
Bob Meade	By Albert
	Nicki Anne Adams
	Brian Cross
	Janette Pluhle

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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Houston City Council

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December 3

The council meeting today began with the controller's quarterly report. Controller Parker stated that we had a decrease in revenue of \$1,000,000 due to the loosening of sales tax revenue. The total revenue brought in by the city during this term was \$85.9 million. The staff was at present in New York attempting to secure a bond transaction. She returned to the Mayor for a report on the pension concerns.

Mayor White said the pension plan agreed to in 2004 was inadequate and by law it is fixed at the 2004 rate. There is a problem with the pensions for both the police and fire departments. The Mayor said there is a problem with predictability and affordability. The pension should be designed according to the city's affordability. It also needs to be based on a percentage of the payroll.

He added that in 2004 the council had redesign the pension plan to 15% of payroll. In order to sustain a viable pension it would have to be 30% of payroll but under state law we cannot change what we had agreed to.

He has come up with a number of proposals:

1. Reduce the liabilities of the pension.
2. Provide predictability of long term assets.

He said that it would be unfair to change the pension amount after a person retires. When talking about changing the pension system the local newspapers were helpful in returning the conditions so they would be in favor of the changes. The city is going to bolster the assets by a note to be secured by the real estate of the city such as the Convention Hotel.

He also said that we need to have a pension executive, able to provide actuarial based on payroll and city's contribution. Mayor White said that we need periodic audits by an actuary and we need a predictable amount that we can expect over the long term. He said that unlike the Social Security System we would be closer to being able to fund the pension as time goes on.

Education Report

by Peggy Alt

The League of Women Voters - Texas was well represented at the November State Board of Education (SBOE) offering testimony on the science curriculum standards submitted by the science teacher writing groups hired by the Texas Education Agency. At that meeting about 90 science teachers and scientists from Texas also presented testimony supporting the work of the teacher writing groups and the standards that were submitted to the State Board of Education.

The first reading and preliminary voting by the Board will occur at their January meeting. All LWV-Houston Area members are encouraged to write to their local SBOE representative in support of the proposed science standards. The following is the testimony offered by our LWV Houston and Nan Clayton on November 19.

"The League of Women Voters of Texas appreciates this opportunity to provide input on revisions to the K-12 science curriculum in Texas, as proposed in Draft 1.

The League of Women Voters of Texas supports a statewide, standardized curriculum that provides the academic rigor students need to succeed in college and careers throughout the nation and the world. In addition, the League believes that our curriculum should be developed with broad input from Texas educators from K-12 to university level.

These are the reasons why

the League endorses the proposed new science curriculum standards for grades K-12, Draft 1, written by work groups of teachers and educators appointed by the Texas Education Agency. Their proposed draft strengthens and streamlines the science curriculum at both primary and secondary levels, and uses the scientific processes of observation, analysis, and the ability physically to test concepts.

The Draft 1 curriculum from the work groups supports instruction in the scientific concept of evolution that is widely endorsed by scientists throughout the world. It is critical to understanding of the biological sciences. The students in our state must be well versed in this concept to compete in the global market.

The approach taken by the work groups is to be commended for drawing on the expertise of recognized scientists and experts. A definition of science from the National Academy of Sciences clarifies that supernatural concepts do not belong in the public school curriculum. Language that matches new standards from the Science Teachers Association of Texas requires students to "analyze and evaluate scientific explanations using empirical evidence, logical reasoning, and experimental and observational testing." Not included is unscientific language about strings and weaknesses of scientific theories.

Texas is the home of NASA, as well as many high-tech industries and internationally renowned medical facilities and universities. Let us adopt a science curriculum and textbooks that will prepare Texas students for work at such world-class employers."

Other issues discussed and voted upon at the same meeting included:

- Awards for Employers for Education Excellence Awards from the Houston Area Economic Model of Houston, the Federal Reserve Bank of Houston, and Procter-Kellogg-Coppers of Houston.

- National History Day winners from Houston area: Annie Salinas of Solene Homeschool in Spring and Austin Glawson and Isamim Muhammad of Eastmore High School in Aldine ISD.

- The Board set a per capita allotment rate of \$296 for the 2008-2009 school year from the Available School Fund.

- The Board voted to approve the per-student cost of administering the 2008-2009 TAKS test for private school students.

- The search for legal counsel for the Permanent School Fund was delayed until the January meeting.

- The Board agreed that the percent distribution rate to the Available School Fund from the Permanent School Fund for fiscal year 2008-2010 will be 2.5 percent for funding of instructional materials.

- The Board approved revisions to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Mathematics in order to incorporate approved college readiness standards into the state curriculum standards.

- The Board approved for final reading and filing the new performance standards for reading and mathematics assessments in Grades 3-8 based on the implementation of a pilot scale. This means that students can be compared from grade to grade for a better measure of student improvement on the academic skills.

- Prerequisite guidelines for instruction materials were considered as per the 2011 proclamation in addition to the regular materials for K-6.

- The Board approved amendments to policies for administration of the school district bond guarantee program and the procedures a school district must follow when applying for a bond guarantee.

- The Board approved the selection of BlackRock Inc. of New York to provide investment management services for the International Index Fund for the Permanent School Fund.

- The Board approved for second reading and final adoption amendments to the Annual Report on Open Enrollment Charter Governance which reflects a statutory correction and modifies the annual governance reporting requirements. Additionally, the Board approved the selection of eight new applicants for Charter Schools this brings the number of charter schools in Texas to 215.



Governor Rick Warren speaking at the Women's General Meeting.



LWV President Laura Blalock talks about local progress planning at last year's meeting.



League members enjoying lunch before the November General Meeting.



League members enjoy a power on Election Night at Channel 2.

Just a reminder - this year voters in League areas take part in the VOTER and our web site. A phone call is worth a hundred words.

The Houston League in Action and Pictures

Councilmember Helm asked if we were doing anything to tighten the city's budget to compensate for the short fall. The Mayor replied that we had large reserves to help tide us over during the recession. She asked, "At what point do we make provisions for a recession?"

Mayor White responded that we will delay several projects until we can fund them.

Councilmember Coutertruck moved how the legislature impacted us about the pension plan, and how the council could help?

Councilmember Sullivan asked Mayor Bill White said that the legislature certainly impacted us by having a pension board that allows employees to set the rates. He also said the council could certainly help by contacting the legislature.