

The Houston VOTER

League of Women Voters-Houston Area • June 2009

SUMMER PROGRAM

Tour of Willow Water Hole
**New Harris County
 Flood Control Center**
July 23 • 10:30 a.m.

Lecture - walking tour - lunch
 Willow Water Hole is located in Westbury
 at S. Post Oak near Hwy.90
 Precise directions will be provided

RSVP by July 20 to
secretary@lwvhouston.org
or call 713-784-2923

President's Message

By Nancy Parra

I'm very excited about the next two years and what we can accomplish. At the Annual Meeting, I stated that the Houston League at this point faces three major challenges. We need to increase our membership, especially engage younger members; we need to make our image and presence more visible in the community; and we need to increase our funding capabilities. My expectations are that, working together, we can achieve these goals.



The new Board held its first meeting May 22, and everyone on the Board is quite enthusiastic about realizing these objectives and planning next year's events. We are already working on the new Study of a Public Defender for Harris County that was approved at the Annual Meeting. Several of us are traveling to Kerrville for the LWV-TX Regional Workshop. We are presenting the LWV-US webcast in our conference room. And we are planning a summer program.

I hope all of you will join us in our events and play a very active role in all our activities. We need you to make a commitment to the League and to its goals. I encourage you to join me and the rest of the Board in making the next year a successful one.

Reduced Voter Mailings

Due to escalating postal costs, we will be mailing the Voter every other month rather than monthly. The five Voters will be as follows: September/October; November/December; January/February; March/April; and May/June. Since we will not be printing the Voter every month, we will be including more information on our website and will be sending more email reminders with information about upcoming events.

If we don't have your email, be sure to send it to us at Secretary@lwvhouston.org.

Annual Meeting

The 89th Annual Meeting of the Houston Area LWV was held May 14 and began with a talk by Tax Assessor-Collector Leo Vasquez. A new study was adopted: Study of a Public Defender for Harris County. A budget was passed with no increase in dues. And a slate of officers was elected.

President..... Nancy Parra
 Program VP..... Lynn Walshak
 Advocacy VP Jan Wilbur
 Community Relations VP Judy Hollinger
 Organization VP Ann Herbage
 Treasurer..... Martha Murphree
 Secretary Shirley Gibson
 Directors:
 Lula Blake Mary Lee Burris
 Linda Cohn Wayne Derrick
 Gwen Essinger Louise Greeley-Copley
 Leslie Taylor

Millie Whittington was presented with the Helen Hunter award for her continued service in International Affairs and Immigration. *Ed. note – see photos on page 5.*

The delicious dinner was catered by Blake's Barbecue. The Silent Auction brought in over \$1,000.

INSIDE

- Hero Rewards
- Committee Reports
- Austin Report

... and more

The LWV-HA Observers

Houston City Council

Shirley Gibson Reporting

April 22

Proposal for Using Light Rail for MacGregor Park:

Mr. Turner spoke for the Parks board to tell us that the area that the light rail would cross is an undeveloped area that has not been available for recreation since there is no parking off Almeda. It would allow people to take advantage of the park by transporting people into the park. He said that there is ongoing education in HISD by Metro to help the children learn to avoid the tracks.

Mr. Preston Roe, president of Super Neighborhood 60 spoke next and he said that the Super Neighborhood 60 is in favor of the rail.

Councilmember Holm asked if we had done any safety studies. Mr. Turner's reply was that no safety studies have been done by the city. He also said that this rail line will be on the edge of the park.

Councilmember Jones said that her concern is for the children. Councilmember Johnson said that the city needs dialogue with HISD crossing guards.

Councilmember Lovell said that she really liked that the train was going to make the park available. Councilmember Kahn wanted to know if the city is getting Metro dollars for the access. The Open Forum closed and the Question was called. It passed.

The lift stations are old and this must be addressed soon. We are at sea level and this causes us to have additional pumping and run off costs. There are also electricity and chemical costs that must be passed on to the consumer. The mayor thanked Councilmember Clutterbuck for her work in this area.

Councilmember Brown wants to have a senior exemption for the rate hike. He asked if we could buy our energy in bulk. Mayor White said that he would like to see the city generate some of the power we use and for us to recycle rain water but that is in the future.

Councilmember Sullivan said that out sourcing is not always bad or more expensive. Councilmember Lovell said that we can't keep going into the red over this and leaving the city with a large debt. We must pass a rate increase and be responsible. Councilmember Adams is worried about the people in her district not being able to afford this rate with the smart meter rate also. The question was called and the rate increase passed with Holm and Sullivan voting no.

April 29

Mr. Alfred Moran, a city employee, reported that the permits renewal process is to be put on line immediately for Alcohol and Sound permits. In 90 days most of the other permits except the public works permits and food permits will be on line. Mr. Moran said that this service will cut the number of employee hours a great deal. So far no studies have been made but he is sure it will save a large amount of

Volunteer Needed

A volunteer is needed to serve as Commissioners Court Observer. Sharon Friedman, after many years of serving as Commissioners Court observer together with her late husband Harold, has decided that she cannot continue in this position. If you are interested in taking on this volunteer role, please email Secretary@lwvhouston.org or call 713-784-2923.

money. Questions followed from the Council.

Councilmember Lawrence asked if there was some way that the council could be kept in the loop so that they could know if convenience stores that have gambling could be eliminated.

Councilmember Brown complimented the city and the mayor for their innovation. He said that he goes to civic clubs and Home Owners Associations and he wanted to know if there was some way that these organizations could have input.

Mayor White said that the city is going to cross reference the city web data base with Stewart Title and other title companies so that these permits are only given legally.

Councilmember Rodriguez said that his concern was the same as other council members.

Mr. Moran's said that we will be on the cutting edge of technology. He said the city is changing the entire system to put all of the permits possible on line as well as the safe guards.

And finally Councilmember Sullivan wanted to know if the permits were fixed to be sure of certificate of occupancy. Mr. Moran said that this is a renewal of existing permits only.

May 13

Yesterday's press conference about the budget was followed by the Mayor's report this morning at the City council session.

The mayor told us that although we are in a deep recession the city's budget is still providing tax relief for seniors. He also brought up that the city has focused on public safety. In the past year we have hired 5,000 officers and we designated our surplus revenue to this effort. We also are providing the best fire department possible.

Next year we will be building one new library and remodeling three others.

We have purchased a helicopter and electronic devices for the HPD. Our hope is to save personnel by increasing our ability to receive and store data. 911 & 311 have a capacity to handle numerous calls without having a busy signal.

Health and Human services will meet its commitment to the population.

Solid waste is going to limit its tonnage by recycling and conservation.

Councilmember Clutterbuck, chair of the budget

continued on page 5

Nothing from Austin is not enough

By Millie Whittington

Like growing old, watching the Texas Legislature "ain't for sissies!"

In this session, a few immigration bills proposed comprehensive reform. A bill to target employers who knowingly hire illegals showed some advancement as did several bills condemning human trafficking. Another bill beneficial to refugees and asylees did make it to consideration by both houses. Most of the bills filed, however, were mean-spirited. Some aimed at denying most programs to babies born of undocumented parents. Punitive measures filed included such things as restricting undocumented aliens to geographic areas, prohibiting rental of property to anyone without proof of citizenship, and turning all governmental enforcement entities into immigration officers.

Sage observers of the Texas Legislature have not been particularly disturbed by the death of good measures. The Houston *Chronicle* published an incisive article headlined "Key Bills Headed to the 'Dead Zone.'" One of the authors of anti-immigration bills even remarked that Texas legislators considered most immigration bills to be dead. One of my questions is: Why is there a "dead zone"?

Are anti-immigrant legislators themselves descended from immigrants or did the stork bring them?

Mayor's Complete Count Committee

Barb Swartz and Nancy Parra attended the Mayor's Complete Count Committee meeting in May. The Committee Chairman is Mayor Bill White and the Vice Chair is Councilmember James Rodriguez. Gabe Sanchez, the Director of the Dallas Regional Office of the U.S. Census Bureau, also spoke at the meeting.

Houston lost 32 million dollars in funding for such items as transportation and public schools because of the discrepancy between the census in 2000 and the number of people actually residing in the city. The undercount was between 15 and 30 percent of the population. The groups traditionally undercounted are Hispanics; young; African-American males; recent immigrants; and children under two. The overall response rates were Houston 61 percent, Texas 64 percent, and National 67 percent. The goal of the Complete Count Committee is to exceed the national average in 2010.

The Committee wants to partner with as many organizations as possible to begin an outreach and publicity campaign. Five subcommittees have been formed: Outreach, Volunteer, Business Partners, Finance and Publicity. Barb Swartz is participating on the Volunteer Committee, and Nancy Parra is participating on the Publicity Committee.

Membership Directory

We are in the process of updating our Membership Directory, which will be mailed in August with the September/October Voter. Please check your information in the 2008-2009 Membership Directory. Email any changes/corrections to Secretary@lwvhouston.org or call 713-784-2923.

National Popular Vote (NPV) Consensus

Jan Wilbur

In May, the LWVUS announced the following position as a result of the NPV Study and consensus process:

"The LWVUS affirms its support of the direct election of the president and abolition of the Electoral College, but the LWVUS has no position on the National Popular Vote Compact as studied in 2008-2009."

In other words, there was no consensus on NPV. Although about half of the Leagues reporting supported the NPV Compact, the other half were about equally split between opposing the compact and not being able to reach consensus. Consensus is not a vote and requires a preponderance of opinion in order to support a position. On that basis the board had no recourse but to report "no consensus."

Supporters of the NPV Compact are deeply disappointed. Because abolishing the Electoral College remains difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, prompting the adoption of this study, the LWVUS board will be exploring other options in the coming months.

Options could include examination of other plans similar to the NPV Compact, proposing a concurrence at Convention 2010 on the NPV Compact, or continued examination of the NPV Compact itself. The committees also discussed an option for an extension to the study to take a direct online survey of members who attended consensus meetings with a question up or down on the NPV Compact.

LWVH Hero Awards

The Heroes of the Month Award winners for May were Karl Essinger and Linda Cohn.

Linda was awarded her award for overseeing the Hope Election. She was there until 4:30 a.m.! There is something to be said for going above and beyond as a volunteer. Linda served at the election proceedings with honor and integrity. The League is lucky to have such a knowledgeable and dedicated volunteer.

Karl Essinger was the other award winner. For those of you who may not know Karl, he is the son of Gwen Essinger. To Pat and Yolanda, he is their guardian angel for all of the computers, printers and anything else related to making the office run smoothly. During the move, Karl could be found at the office several days and nights a week. The League couldn't afford the cost of the computers services that Karl provides on a pro bono basis.

Thank you again to both Heroes of the Month of May.

committee, complimented Michelle Mitchell for her effort to get the budget compiled, printed and out to the council. She also noted that her committee is holding budget workshops for the city to attend to learn about the budget. She asked that people write up their questions ahead of the workshops so the council has time to respond to their questions. She said after the workshops have finished the council will vote on the budget.

Councilmember Lovell expressed her thanks to Michelle Mitchell, Mayor White and Councilmember Clutterbuck for their efforts to come up with a good budget that will have fewer funds with the same employees. M.J. Khan also thanked those people who worked so hard on the budget. He wondered about the Pension Fund.

Mayor White responded with an analogy about a family saving money for college. He said that they just have to cut expenses in other areas. He said the pension fund is "a given" and other debts will have to be restricted.

Councilmembers Adams and Brown asked about the "Rainy Day Fund." Mayor White responded that when FEMA and the private insurance companies pay us what we are owed that we again will have a "Rainy Day Fund." That ended discussion.

The Parks Department is getting two new Community Centers.

The waste water treatment facilities are to be increased.

We have a major aviation center that we will continue to upkeep.

We are improving drainage systems to prevent flooding.

Each department was asked to meet with Mayor White to discuss what was needed to maintain our services yet maximize the use of personnel. No personnel will be cut in foreseeable future. We are limiting expenses to .5 to 1 percent growth. The excess funds that have mounted up will still be used to fund public safety.

The Mayor opened the time to questions from the council.

May 27

Today there is both city council meeting and a public hearing. I am reporting about the public hearing since it addresses issues Houston homeowners are concerned about.

A gentleman from the Foreclosure task force said that his task force supplied counseling and loan support to those whose property is being foreclosed. The next speaker, also from the task force, told of events being held throughout the community. She mentioned that they were without funds but that PBS had partnered with them to help get out the word.

Councilmember Lawrence asked her to put the information on an email to her office and she would send the information out in a news letter. Several other council members also said that they would send it out.

Wanda Adams said what homeowners needed was help changing their lifestyle not just help on restructuring the loan. She said that these people have been in trouble for a long period of time and that they need extensive counseling not just a band aid.

The next group of speakers talked about a resident's new car port. It seems that they and many other residents had car ports before hurricane Ike but that her car port was blown down. She got her insurance money and replaced the car port with a better one. An inspector arrived and gave her a red tag because she had no permit.

The resident went to the permits department and was told that she had built on the neighborhood easement and would not be allowed a permit. The crux of the matter is that the homeowners for over twenty years have been building carports in the easement.

The Mayor and Councilmember Johnson were in sympathy with the family but didn't know just how to handle it. Councilmember Lawrence mentioned that when people in a restricted subdivision violate the restrictions over a period of time and nothing is done about it there is a precedent that should be followed. The Mayor told her to see someone in legal and he would handle it.

Councilmember Jones said that

New Study

By Leslie Taylor

Co-chairs of the LWV study committee studying issues regarding a Harris County Public Defender Office are Ernestine W. Dansby and Leslie C. Taylor. They invite you to join the committee. The first meeting was June 1, but more summer meetings will be offered. The Harris County Commissioner's Court has already started work on the issue. The initial outline of a plan was presented in a mid-year report available on line at www.co.harris.tx.us/agenda/2008/09-23-08FY%202008-09%20MYBR%20Master.pdf. A report from the Commissioners Court study group is expected soon.

For those who want to get started reading for the League Committee, check out the website of the Texas Task Force for Indigent Defense and the resources and reports available at www.courts.state.tx.us/tfid/Resources.asp.

Anyone interested in being on the committee should email Leslie at lctaylor@earthlink.net.

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the city had handled this very poorly and something should be said to the department.

The next group of speakers told about a trucking firm that had moved in the neighborhood and built up its land. They stated this promoted flooding and that the trucks were using neighborhood streets that do not allow through traffic by trucks.

After each had spoken and the council had had a chance to suggest that there were many ordinances that the trucking firm had violated, the mayor referred the speakers to Mr. Draybeck to hear them and correct the issue of the trucks using their streets and the land build up.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

June 13	LWVUS Virtual Council webcast, League office, 1-4 p.m. (call for details)
June 20	Board Meeting & Calendar Planning
July 23	Summer Program (see page 1)
July 24	Board Meeting

Pix from the Annual Meeting



Executive Director Pat Downing gives her report



Guest speaker Leo Vasquez, Harris Co. Tax Assessor/Collector



Millie Whittington (right) is surprised to receive the Helen Hunter Award. Laura Blackburn leads the applause.

Voter Service Activities gearing up!

by Judy Hollinger

Voter Service will be a huge emphasis for the League in the next few months. The November ballot will include elections for City of Houston officials and amendments to the Texas State Constitution. League projects will include voter registration, candidate forums, speakers bureau presentations, and publishing and distribution of the Voters Guide. If you would like to help with any of these activities, contact Judy Hollinger, Community Relations Vice President 713-665-4458 or jbholl@hotmail.com.

We welcome these new and returning members:

Jane Bavineau _____ Alicia Nuzzie _____

 Stephen Burton _____ Jai Rose _____

 Ethel Hikal _____ James S. Stewart _____

Thanks to the following for their contributions:

Jan Wilbur
 Madeleine Appel
 Jane K. Bomba
 Henry Horne
 Sylvia Garcia
 Sandra Reeves
 Mary Titus
 Martha Murphree
 Alice May Berthelsen
 Willie Dean Floyd

**Democracy is
 NOT a
 Spectator Sport!**

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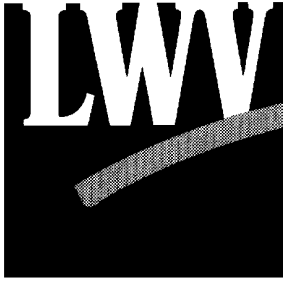
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Houston League Advocacy

By Jan Wilbur

The League had an extremely ambitious list of priorities for this legislative session, which means we have had an active role to play in our advocacy the past several months. Some of the actions we have taken are:

- Faxed letters to State Board of Education members to keep science in the science curriculum.
- Faxed LWV HA letters to our State Senators in support of SB 855; the bill to allow counties to ask voters to consider approving new funding for critical transportation improvements including the expansion of regional rail service.
- Sent a LWV HA letter to Congressman Gene Green to make sure the climate change bill that comes out of the Energy and Commerce Committee on which he serves is as strong as possible.
- Faxed LWV HA letters to all our State Representatives opposing SB 362, the bill requiring voters to have a photo ID before they can vote.
- Faxed letters and activated LWV HA lobby corps in support of SB 315 establishing an independent redistricting commission.
- Faxed LWV HA letters to all 25 Harris County Representatives in support of CSHB 139 to provide for full-day kindergarten.
- Worked with Commissioner Sylvia Garcia on SB 2468 to close the revolving door for ex-County employees and elected officials, prohibiting them from lobbying the County for two years following their departure. Both President Laura Blackburn and Advocacy Vice President Jan Wilbur have been to Austin to testify in favor of this bill.
- Lynn Walshak has lobbied extensively on a number of bills seeking to protect homeowners in HOAs – opposing the bad bills and supporting the good ones.
- Faxed letters to the Speaker of the House and the Lieutenant Governor to

break the logjam and pass expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program.

These are only a fraction of the bills that the League monitored and supported or opposed during the session. Many of our bills did not make it out of committee and as of this writing we do not know the fate of the ones that are still being considered as the session winds down.

And stay tuned. There will likely be one or more Special Sessions this summer. We hear that the governor will call a special session if the Voter ID does not pass, if the Texas Wind Insurance program is not fixed, or if using the stimulus money to supplement the General Fund is ruled unacceptable.

We want to thank all of you who responded to the myriad of Action Alerts and our Lobby Corps Team Captains, especially Judy Hollinger and Louis Whittington for your efforts at Making Democracy Work.