

The Houston VOTER

League of Women Voters-Houston Area • March 2009

March General Meeting Coastal Building Codes

Friday, March 13
11:30 to 1:00

United Way Building, 50 Waugh Dr.

Speakers:

Sheila Blake

Assistant Director, City of Houston Code Enforcement

Hal Caton

Building Code Consultant

Box Lunch – \$10

Deadline is March 9

Send a check, call the office with your credit card,
or bring a brown-bag lunch

President's Message

By Laura Blackburn

I hope that I will see many of you at the Repast honoring Anna Russell. This is our major fund-raising event of the year, and it is important for members of the Houston Area LWV to be there as well as our other invited guests. Besides, it's a wonderful party! We owe a debt of gratitude to Jackie Alfred and Judy Hollinger for their months of hard work—thank you, my friends!

Lack of funding is affecting all areas of the LWV—I received notice this week that the LWV-US is not going to be able to publish the National Voter, either in print or digitally, due to lack of funding. While the local League has not come to that point—and I hope we never do—we, too, are struggling for funds. I want to thank all of you who have supported the Houston League financially. It enables us to do the good work that we always do. Thank you!

The focus this month in our General Meeting and units is our locally-adopted new program on coastal building codes. Michael Fjetland and his committee have done a wonderful job of writing our Facts & Issues. Please read it carefully, for while we have tried to make a world of information logical and straight forward, it is a complex topic. Our guests for the General Meeting are Sheila Blake, Assistant Director, City of Houston Code Enforcement, and Hal Caton, a consultant who trains engineers in code enforcement. I know you will enjoy hearing them.

Meanwhile, have a wonderful month!

March emphasis

Coastal Building Codes

By Michael Fjetland

Hurricane Ike affected all of us in the Houston area. The League has taken on the task of studying our building codes to determine what, if anything, should be done with these codes to address future damages from hurricanes – an annual event for coastal residents.

We will present our findings and we encourage all with an interest in learning more about this crucial area to attend our March General Meeting. To learn about and discuss the issue even more, find a convenient unit meeting and attend.



Don't forget!

**Make your reservation for
the Repast
honoring**



**City Secretary Anna Russell
on March 5.
Deadline is March 2.**

Our Condolances

Our sympathies to the following on their losses:

- ... Kay Guenther on the death of her husband, Walter
- ... Lula Blake on the death of her son-in-law, Norman Smith
- ... the friends and family of Gwen Robberson
- ... the friends and family of Eleanor Tinsley

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The LWV-HA Observers

Houston City Council

Shirley Gibson Reporting

January 28

Joe Turner of the City Parks Department spoke for the Mayor's Report. He reported that the city had designated 4,986 acres of wilderness property near Lake Houston as a Wilderness Park. It is adjacent to Liberty County and Montgomery County. This land received a grant from both the Woodlands and the Mitchell Foundation to help come up with a plan for development and management of the park. Montgomery County is going to pave the roads to the park from Route 59. The design of the park will include the possibility of donor owned cabins that would be used by the donor two weeks a year and by the general population other times. This is similar to the YMCA of the Rockies. Right now there are two buildings that once belonged to the Girl Scouts of America.

The plans for the park include camp sites with pads for tents and water and electricity. Canoe docks for a lake will be constructed. A recreation center, trails, and the lodges that exist at present will provide places for park visitors to stay and play. The park will be developed on the upper end of the property and the rest will be wilderness. Roads will provide access to all areas of the land. The plans are for the park authority to get \$1,000,000 for the construction of the Visitors Center. The business plan allows for private contributions like Green Houston so that it will become a quality area for families through out Houston, Woodlands Conroe and Liberty County.

February 4

The council meeting began with the Mayor's report on the state of the city's financial health. Mayor White brought out that there is a downturn right now in the city and that we are looking at a short fall of several million. He said that we have to maintain a positive frame of mind as we cut expenditures. We cannot have deficit spending in the City of Houston so each department will have to pull together to come up with ways we can continue to have services while at the same time cutting the costs. He believes the city will weather the storm and come out of this riding high if we gather our resources in the city personnel. He said that each department will have to cut its budget to the bone and yet still serve the constituents. He mentioned that Sue Lovell, the mayor pro tem, was in Washington speaking to the Senate Appreciations Committee attempting to get part of the stimulus package. Also we are waiting for our FEMA money for the storm damage.

Councilmember Khan said that Houston is a can do city. Councilmember Holm said that we should be on zero based budgeting. Councilmember Sullivan said we were like a battleship steady in the water even if we take a hit. After City Controller Parker presented the monthly report we moved on to the Consent Agenda.

One item on the agenda was an ordinance concerning

Harris County Commissioners Court

By Sharon and Harold Friedman

There was discussion about the terrible dog fighting, gambling, and dumping of dead and sick dogs. The dumping is happening around the Eastex Freeway. The dog fighting is occurring in Channelview, the Acres Homes Area, and the Cuney Homes Area. There has been some prevention of the dog fighting for many years, but now there will be more officers involved to stop it completely.

There was a long and appreciative talk supporting the National Guard and Reserve recognizing the men and women who voluntarily serve our country and their fellow men. The commissioners were thanked profusely for their strong support of the guard.

Authorization was given to enter into agreements with Fort Bend County, Harris County Hospital District, PIER Systems, Inc., and the Governor's Division of Emergency Management to facilitate the transfer of five public information emergency response teams from Fort Bend County to Harris County.

Request was given by the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management for approval of agreements between the county and Emergency Districts # 9, 13, 15, 16, 28, and 29 to provide mutual aid assistance at no cost to the county. It was emphasized that this cooperation was at no financial cost to Harris County.

Harris County will have a felony mental health court, the first one in the county's history to focus exclusively on felony defendants diagnosed with such serious conditions as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and severe depression. Besides helping these sick people, it will save the state a great deal of funds.

swimming pools in abandoned condo units in District B. Councilmember Johnson wanted some way to put liens on the abandon condos. It was brought out that each unit of the complex would have to have legal action to give each one a lien. It is not feasible to do that unless the city goes to Austin to get the law changed so that one lien would apply to all units in the condo complex. The ordinance was tagged by Councilmember Johnson.

February 11

The council meeting started off today with a public hearing on the Amendments and Financing Plan for Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone number twenty (southwest Houston) District F- Khan and District G - Holm. No one was there from the zone to speak for or against the amendments. The city spoke for enlarging the area of the TIRZ to include the area surrounding Sharpstown Mall.

It was brought up that this area is declining and ridden with crime. The mall is in bankruptcy and the city has taken over the property and hired a nationally known redevelopment company to handle the mall. The council was largely in favor of what this TIRZ had done so far.

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Lincoln, Darwin and Voter Registration

By Ann Wood

In one of those fascinating confluences of history that two individuals who changed the world forever would be born oceans apart on the same day, February 12, 1809: Abraham Lincoln, the "Great Emancipator, our 16th President, and Charles Darwin, British Naturalist and father of the Theory of Evolution. They came from radically different backgrounds; Lincoln the child of frontiersman struggling for a living and education while Darwin was born to privilege and afforded opportunities open only to his gender, race and class. Yet both were dedicated to seeing a world where all men were created equal. Their fields of influence may have been different but both labored long and hard, sacrificed much, and died as subjects of heated controversy because they were men who asked that we embrace change and see ourselves in new ways.

The legacies of these great leaders are everywhere: our government, businesses, schools, worship centers, and homes. Lincoln insisted that all men in the United States (women would have to wait a few more decades) were citizens entitled to all the rights and privileges of that state. This expanded everyone's understanding of our body politic. Darwin theorized that we all evolved from the same source material through an incredibly long process where tiny changes could and would, over time, alter organisms. He proved that all living things are constantly undergoing change.

Here is where their ideas intersect with our Voter Registration Program. Predicated on the belief that every citizen should be given an opportunity to vote ("Thank you, Mr. President") and that everything living is constantly undergoing change ("Mr. Darwin, our gratitude") we can understand and accept the constantly altering nature of Voter Registration. Leo Vasquez was appointed the Harris County Tax Assessor/Collector and Voter Registrar in January. Mr. Vasquez is revising



processes to improve customer (citizen) service and the experience of Volunteer Deputy Voter Registrars (VDRs). One of his first acts was to join our team at the Feb. 4 Naturalization Ceremony. We had a huge group of volunteers on hand to greet him and show him the "best practices" in voter registration. He talked to us about our experiences and listened to our suggestions for improving things. We think it is a great beginning.

Some of his changes:

- a new Volunteer Service Center near Northwest Mall where VDRs can collect and return applications and get training without worrying about traffic and parking;
- a training program for new and renewing VDRs;
- preferred use of triplicate books to provide citizens a copy of their application;
- turning in no more than 60 applications at district offices;
- receiving a receipt for applications turned in. Every VDR is expected to attend a training session prior to becoming or renewing as deputies.

Lincoln, Darwin, Voter Registration ... Every citizen has the right to vote; we enable it. Change is inevitable; we embrace it.

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.

National Popular Vote Study

By Jan Wilbur

Delegates to the LWVUS 2008 Convention adopted a fast-track study of the National Popular Vote Compact, which is an alternative way to elect the U.S. President. The League already has a position to abolish the Electoral College in Presidential elections, but to get a constitutional amendment to do this has proved difficult if not impossible.

The National Popular Vote Compact is another way to approach the issue without requiring a constitutional amendment. Basically, the compact would require a state that signs the compact to cast its electoral votes for the Presidential slate that has the largest national popular vote total. States with a combined total of 270 electoral votes (enough to win the election) would have to agree to the compact for it to go into effect.

Pro and Con arguments as well as the text of the National Popular Vote Compact and other background materials as well as the consensus questions are on the LWVUS Web site at www.lwv.org/NPV. The Consensus deadline is May 1, 2009.

Since we have not calendared this consensus into our schedule, the LWVH Board voted to take consensus by concurrence with recommendations of a study committee. The study committee will meet at 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday March 25 at the League office. If there is enough interest, a second committee meeting will be scheduled at 5:30 p.m. on March 25 for those who cannot come to a daytime meeting. Please contact Jan Wilbur if you would like to meet then. Anyone who wishes to attend is welcome to do so but only League members may take part in the consensus.

The study committee will take consensus and then send the consensus to all League members for whom we have an email address and seek their input. If your email address is not in the Directory, please contact the League office and give them your correct email address so you will be included.

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January 2009

Police Advisory Committee

By Barb Swartz

Chief Hurtt's representative reported the latest cadet class graduated 58 officers. This brings the staff over the 5,000 mark, where they would like to continue to be. The next class has 70 in it, so they are in a growth mode, but always need more men and women.

They have two outstanding projects: 1. Ordinance Funds to replace the radio with a new system to enable officers to react with other agencies in the area; 2. Replacement of the Records Management System that needs \$19-20 million plus in-kind contributions and will take three years.

He said the jail merger is important; they want to get out of the jail business. The bond election was defeated so the merger was postponed. When it happens, the city will pay a fee per prisoner, resulting in better economics. If it doesn't happen, \$85 million is required for a new jail.

He was asked about the chase

policy and reported that it was recently revised, is under constant review, and tweaked if necessary.

A representative from the Public Affairs Department spoke about their Community Outreach Program established in August 2004. They respond to calls for services and have a "Blue Crew" that has done such things as renovate a house, provide beds for refugees, etc. all with neighbors help. They find that building bridges in a community this way helps them become familiar with the community and they have located felons at times. They also have a "hug-a-bear" program providing new bears that are donated and available for children at accident scenes and other trauma events.

The Youth Police Advisory Council is comprised of students recruited from grades 9-12, who discuss issues they are concerned about. These include teen dating, peer pressure, and a large range of issues.

Happy Birthday The League Celebrates!



"Texas Friendly" - ??????????

By Millie Whittington

A recent New York Times editorial headline read, "The Nativists Are Restless." The same headline could apply to the 81st Texas Legislature on the immigration issue. Most of the more than 30 bills filed to date have a racist ring to them.

Several states have adopted positive plans to integrate undocumented aliens. They focus on teaching English, job and citizenship training, as well as access to services including education, health care, and public safety.

The new LWVUS immigration position calls for fair treatment under the law for all people in the United States. Until now, Texas is one of the states with more integrative than punitive laws. For example, there is no denial of state college tuition rates to undocumented university students. But, in the 81st Texas House, HB 262, authored by Leo Berman, relates to information regarding the citizenship status of all students and requires

parents or guardians to produce evidence of citizenship which could incriminate them. Another bill would require enforcement personnel of all state agencies to become *de facto* federal immigration officers.

Xenophobia is an ugly word and with the worldwide economic meltdown we are hearing more and more about the resurgence of nationalism. If these hostile immigration bills in the Texas Legislature pass, Texas can forget the slogan "Texas friendly."



At the February meeting on Education, (from left) Rep. Scott Hochberg, Rep. Alma Allen, Peggy Hill, and Dianne Johnson.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

March 4	VOTER Deadline
March 5	REPAST, Omni Houston Hotel, 11:30 a.m.
March 9	LWV-TX Statewide Conference & Lobby Day
March 10	Briefing, League office, 2 p.m.
March 13	General Meeting, Building Codes, United Way Bldg., 11:30 a.m.
March 16-21	Units-Consensus on Coastal Building Codes <i>see back page for locations and times</i>
March 18	VOTER Mailing
March 25	NPV Committee, 10 a.m. & 5:30 p.m.
March 27	Board Meeting, League office, 10 a.m.

Thanks to the following for their contributions:

Vince Ryan	Barbara Yantis
Ellen Kimball Martin	Carey Stuart
Samuel D. Keeper	
Lynn B. Johnson	Barbara Swartz
Doris Edington	<i>in memory of Gwen</i>
Alma Allen	<i>Robberson</i>

City Hall Observers

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Councilmember Jones said she was pleased that the crime problem had been addressed and lights had been put back at the mall. She said that the tax money will fix streets and side walks which will help restore the property values for the aging population in Sharpstown. Councilmember Lovell thanked those serving on the boards of this TIRZ. She said the quality of life will be improved. The amendments passed.

The next item to be discussed was an ordinance that dealt with the types of trees that can be planted near power lines, sidewalks, and streets. Councilmember Holm put forth two amendments. One said that the money that comes from an area be put back in that area for planting, and the other to commemorate former Councilmember Tinsley with Live Oak Trees planted near Reliant park below the power lines.

Discussion followed concerning the types of trees suitable for planting near power lines, sidewalks, and streets. It was brought up by Councilmember Jones that if we are concerned about specific trees we need to send the list of trees back to the committee. Several people thought Live Oaks shouldn't be prohibited since they are slow growing with low branches.

At the end of this discussion the council passed the amendments first, followed by the ordinance.

National Popular Vote Study

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The consensus will be approved at the April Board Meeting and sent to LWVUS by the consensus deadline of May 1.

For further information or questions, contact the chair of the committee, Jan Wilbur at janwgadfly@comcast.net

We welcome these new and returning members:

Dr. Sarah Baed	<i>Note these changes:</i>
	Rita Aron
Karen Derr	Katherine Aubin
	Novelle Doherty
	Peggy Hamric
Betsy Hamilton	Priscilla Huston
	Rene Mostrefi
Marjorie LaFoe	Ann Parker
	Dr. Linda Lee Peacock
	Louise H. Sutton

The 81st Legislature

The 81st Legislature convened on January 13 and we know you will want to keep up with what is being considered and debated in Austin between now and the end of May.

Here are some helpful websites to help you do that:

www.ethics.state.tx.us/phpcsearch.html – Site for campaign contributions

www.legis.state.tx.us/ – Texas Legislature Online. Find

- Members of House and Senate
- Committees
- Bills
- MY TLO to follow bills, committees, and get alerts

www.lwvtexas.org – Check LWV-T Legislative Newsletters

www.goodsearch.com – Check news of your legislator

**Need instant information?
Click on: <http://www.lwvhouston.org/>**

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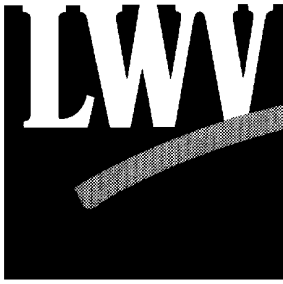
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March Unit Meetings

Monday, March 16
Southwest Day, 1 p.m.

Alief Library
7979 South Kirkwood
Rhoda Haddox
(713)667-5952

West Harris Co., 2:30 p.m.
Eagles Trace, unit PW 117
Joan Golding, 281-596-0935

Citywide Evening, 6 p.m.
Black Lab Pub
4100 Montrose
Jackie Friedman
(713)521-0702

Tuesday, March 17
Spring Branch, 9:30 a.m.

Home of Betty Mooney
9529 Kerrwood Lane
Kay Guenther
(713)464-6870

Thursday, March 19
Midwest, 10 a.m.

Gerald Womack Building
4412 Almeda
Yvette Calloway
(713)747-6555
Millie Whittington
(281)752-0446

Saturday, March 21
New Member/Saturday Unit, 10 a.m.

League office
2650 Fountain View, #328
Judy Hollinger
(713)665-4458

Pick a unit!
Attend
and
Participate

March Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the pros and cons of the Houston Building Code.
2. Discuss the pros and cons of the Harris County Building Code.
3. Discuss the pros and cons of the Texas Residential Construction Commission.
4. Discuss the pros and cons of the Texas Windstorm Agency.

Consensus Question:

In general, how can we improve building codes in coastal areas?

1. ____ Use the most up-to-date building codes possible for both residential and commercial buildings.
2. ____ Make sure that wind speed calculations take into account future projections.
3. ____ Counties should be able to set and enforce strict building codes in coastal areas.
4. ____ Building codes in all jurisdictions should have strict enforcement.
5. ____ The Texas Residential Construction Commission should have strict enforcement standards.
6. Other: