

The Houston VOTER

League of Women Voters-Houston Area • May 2009

89th Annual Meeting LWV Houston Area Thursday, May 14

Special Guest Speaker

Leo Vasquez

Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector
and Voter Registrar

Emerson Unitarian Church

1900 Bering Drive

5:30 Wine Reception & Silent Auction

6:15 Buffet

7:00 Annual Meeting & Awards

\$30 prepayment necessary

Deadline May 11—Send check to the office
4001 N. Shepherd, Suite 213, Houston, TX 77018
Or call 713/784-2923 with credit card number.

President's Message

By Laura Blackburn

Please come to the Annual Meeting! Look at what we will be doing:

- Electing new officers and directors
- Adopting new program—the board is recommending two new studies
- Adopting a budget
- Approving by-laws

In addition, we will have Blake's Barbecue, a Silent Auction and our speaker is Leo Vasquez! It is always a festive occasion, and I hope you will join us.

Due to funding constraints, we are forwarding the Annual Report by email. However, we will have plenty of hard copies available at the meeting for you to follow.

I hope you enjoyed our General Meeting last month—I thought Karl Pepple and Paul Hobby gave thoughtful and entertaining presentations!

It has been my pleasure to serve as your president for the past two years. Thank you for the opportunity.

Annual Meeting Workbook

The Annual Meeting Workbook for the 89th Annual Meeting was emailed as a PDF file to the membership in April. Printed copies of the Workbook will be available at the Annual Meeting for those attending. If you cannot attend the Annual Meeting but would like a printed copy of the Workbook, please send a check for \$5 with your mailing address to the LWV Houston Area office, 4001 N. Shepherd, Suite 213, Houston, TX 77018 and a copy will be mailed to you.

Members proposed and the Board is recommending two new studies for 2009-2010: study of a Public Defender for Harris County and study of Election Administration in Harris County. These items will be proposed for adoption at the Annual Meeting on May 14. If you have an interest in either of these items, please be sure to come and make your views known. See you there.

Annual Meeting Silent Auction

We will again this year have a Silent Auction at the Annual Meeting to be held on May 14 at Emerson Unitarian Church.

This is another way for the LWV of the Houston Area to raise needed funds. For this event to be successful, we need as many as possible to participate. We will need donations such as gift cards, political items, items you may secure from your elected officials or businesses that you feel you can contact. In past auctions there have been crystal, books, jewelry, purses and many other great items. Let your imagination be your guide.

If you are contacting an Elected Official, please let the office know so that we can keep accurate records. We do not want to ask more than once!

If you have items for the auction, please contact Yolanda-Malonson Johnson at 713/784-2923 or Secretary@lwvhouston.org. Please have your items at the office by Monday, May 10 so the office can get ready for this event. If you have any questions, please call the office at 713-784-2923.

INSIDE

- Hero Rewards
- Committee reports
- New officie pictures

... and more

The LWV-HA Observers

Houston City Council

Shirley Gibson Reporting

March 11

The Mayor's report began the meeting with Ann Travis speaking on the congressional stimulus package. As of February 17, when the stimulus package was funded for \$8 billion, we have been aggressively seeking information on how to apply for this funding. The goals of congress are to get this money out quickly. Recovery.gov gives more information about this.

Community Development Block Grant will receive \$1 billion. Houston will receive \$67.8 million. Neighborhood Stabilization will receive \$1.5 billion with Houston receiving \$12.3 million. Also emergency housing receives \$2.25 billion and Houston will receive a share of this. The mayor has been to Washington and Austin to ask for our fair share of these billions. The list of funded programs goes on and on with public safety, firefighting, highways and transportation some of them.

The mayor asked for each councilmember to look at her or his programs and see if they come under the guidelines for this funding. He also said that the funding depends on the population and energy conservation. To receive our fair share we have to be conserving energy in a multitude of ways. This is very competitive with "political elbow slinging fights" among cities in the state.

The Council turned to the ordinance that dealt with the rate increase of utilities i.e. water and waste water rates. Councilmember Green said that this is a hard decision but that the city has had cost increases and it is necessary to increase rates. Mayor White said that we could just defer costs by not maintaining the system and face breakage in the future or we can do what is necessary and increase rates.

Councilmember Khan said that a two dollar increase was hard for his constituents and he really couldn't understand that if the population has increased why we needed to increase rates. The mayor responded that the cost of electricity and the cost of chemicals had gone up to the level that the rates no longer covered the cost of supplying water and sewer service to Houston. Councilmember Khan asked if the rates would go up next year and the next year after that. The mayor said that there was no way of knowing whether this rate increase would be sufficient for the future.

Councilmember Johnson also wanted to know if this would take care of the future. Councilmember Jones was concerned with the cost of the smart meters coming so close to a rate increase. She said that she was going to vote yes but she is still trying to get information about the cost of outsourcing that the city was doing. She said that Annise Parker said that a rate increase was necessary.

Councilmember Clutterbuck thanked Susan Bandy and her Water and Waste Water Department for working so hard on this issue. We do not realize that the reason our bayous reek is because the waste water is not being treated properly.

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 11

The Council started with the monthly financial report. Annise Parker began her report by saying that this month the city has had a shortfall of \$71 million, projecting a shortfall for the year to be \$20million.

The councilmembers were particularly concerned by the fact that she said that we may have trouble getting the "Rainy day" fund reimbursed after the hurricane. It seems that FEMA has been slow to give us the funds owed to us. Councilmember Laurence said the projected date of eight months that Controller Parker suggested was unsuitable since we might have another hurricane before that time. Mayor White said that he has been going to Washington to hurry up the FEMA funds and he believes it will not be eight months before the funds are released. He also said that the "Rainy Day Fund" was a subset of the general fund which has grown in prosperous times.

We can't predict the number of bankruptcy cases that we will have in Houston. We already have had a major company go bankrupt this month causing the short fall to balloon. We could solve it by raising property taxes but council is probably not willing to do that yet. We have broad choices to make.

Councilmember Khan asked how much the hurricane had cost the city. The reply was \$254 million. The mayor said that we will have to use a good portion of the FEMA funds to pay debts incurred from the trash and debris disposal.

Councilmember Khan asked about the red light fine money and what the state is doing with these funds. He said that he wanted to see our funds go to Trauma Centers. Mayor White said that they probably go to Trauma Centers in the areas that ticketed the offense.

Councilmember Holm, getting back to the budget, said that she would like to see the council become more conservative in spending since we are going to have less money coming in.

continued on page 5

Education Report

By Peggy Hill

Vouchers

LWV-TX has a consensus against Vouchers. This is one area that we as a local and state League watch very closely. Currently there are several bills that deal with vouchers in which Nan Clayton and Anne Roussos (LWV- TX chairs) have filed letters of opposition. These bills are SB 183, 1301, and 2204. All three create a special voucher program for children with disabilities. Public schools are closely supervised and must be accountable for children with learning disabilities, while private schools are not. The bills would withhold funding from public schools and would not ensure that children with special needs are serviced properly. Therefore, LWV-TX and Houston Area are in opposition to these three bills.

A separate House bill 2823 filed by Diane Patrick (R-Arlington) purports to close HB 2237's loophole and prevent the commissioner from siphoning off public money to give as voucher grants to private schools under the guise of dropout recovery. LWV-TX supports this bill.

House Bill 2263 was filed by Rob Eissler (R-The Woodlands) and relates to extending the high school innovation grant initiative to middle and junior high schools. On questioning by Joe Heflin (D-Crosbyton), Eissler assured the House that this bill was not intended to provide for vouchers for private schools. To establish clear legislative intent, Heflin asked that this be written and included in the house records.

Update on Stimulus Funds from the Federal Government

Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott said that 50% of the \$2 billion in Title I and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) money for Texas is on its way to Texas local school districts. The remaining 50% of the Title I and IDEA money will arrive in the summer. The amounts each district might expect to receive is posted on the TEA website. Information about how these funds can be used is also posted.

Greater Houston Partnership meeting

On April 8, 2009, I attended the joint meeting of the Education Policy and Education Workforce Development Advisory committee meeting. We discussed legislation dealing with HB/SB3 as well as the Texas public university 10% ruling and Tier 1 status for the University of Houston.

HB/SB3 centers upon K-12 legislation which has established criteria for schools in order to develop a competitive workforce for Texas graduates by regulating how all children (K-12) will become college and career ready. A number of recommendations were made by the committee to clarify and strengthen regulations. Much discussion focused upon the new requirement of high school students to take four years of math, science, English and social studies. End of course exams in these areas were also discussed.

My question for both house and senate committees is who will fund these additional mandates? They will cost a lot of additional money but there is no cost adjustment or financial support as part of these bills. Jenna Watts who is the contact person working with the Senate Education Committee indicated that there were other bills dealing with funding increases for HB/SB3. This will be important to monitor. Unfunded mandates are a serious burden to all public school districts.

Carl Mica discussed the suggestions for the 10% Rule of acceptance to public universities which is currently placing a tremendous stress upon the University of Texas admissions. UT would like to rank applicants within that 10% and guarantee the top 50 percentile with provisions for the additional applicants. It was noted by other universities that this was not a problem for them.

Finally, the University of Houston, in its efforts for achieving Tier 1 ranking, has nearly met all the requirements. These include proving a specified amount of endowments, national and international research accomplishments with distinguished faculty, 200 Ph.D. students within 2 consecutive years, a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, and a high achieving freshman class.

In addition, it was noted that the Duncan Bill (SB35/HB560) would enable funding for research outside the UT/A&M systems. This would be important for the University of Houston. It was announced that of the seven universities vying for Tier 1 status, University of Houston is the closest to achieving this goal.

Check the LWV-TX Legislative Newsletter for late developments.

For complete listing of bills:

http://www.tsta.org/legislative/update/041409_SenateEdAgenda.pdf
http://www.tsta.org/legislative/update/041409_HousePublicEdAgenda.pdf

Police Advisory Committee

By Barb Swartz

Assistant Chief Thaler opened his comments with the report that HPD kicked off the HPD Volunteer Mentorship Program with 17 officers paired with 8th grade boys. He also reported an 8.5 percent reduction in crime, with a ten percent reduction in violent crime. He also noted that HPD is actively hiring and recruitment is going great. Two cadet classes will be completed in May and June to finish this fiscal year. They have three planned for next year and hope for funding for one more.

HPD is presently working on their budget and foresee cuts due to the present economy. They do not plan in any cuts in service. They do anticipate some cuts in overtime.

Chief Hurtt is asking help on two bills in the legislature: opposition to guns on campus; support for mandatory collection of DNA upon conviction of a felony.

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Children's Issues

By Betty Oertel

April was national Child Abuse prevention month, a time to raise awareness about Child Abuse and Neglect and to encourage individuals and communities to support children and families. In Texas, 213 children died in fiscal year 2008 due to abuse. More than 83,000 separate allegations of abuse or neglect were confirmed by Child Protective Services. More than 14,000 children had to be removed from their homes in 2008 because of abuse or neglect. Governor Perry states on the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services website that "every responsible person will agree that one abused child is too many." Yet our state's child protection caseloads are evidence of the shameful fact that child abuse is a widespread issue in Texas" To report Child Abuse and Neglect. If you suspect a child is in immediate danger contact law enforcement or 911. National hot line: 1-800-422-4453 TX hot line: 1-800-252-5400 For more information go to www.dfps.state.tx.us

I was pleased that the position on Child Abuse and Neglect was changed at the conference in Austin by simply dropping the words "in the family". This allows lobbying on a variety of abuses that occur outside the family. It was a long process to make the change, but persistence works. Immediately after our general meeting on Coastal Building codes, One Voice had their monthly membership meeting. In the past they have had speakers but at this meeting every group in One Voice reported on pending legislation in Austin. Marlene Lobberecht, our state early childhood education expert, reported for that group since the chair of that group was in Austin testifying.

One Voice is a network of public, private and non-profit organizations in the Greater Houston Area working together to ensure that the health and human service needs of all Texans are addressed in legislative, regulatory, funding and other public policy initiatives. The Houston Area League is a member of this group.

The Immigration Situation – Stalled and Festering!

By Millie Whittington

Yes, the US economy has headed south. Yes, unemployment in the US tops 8%. Yes, according to the Pew Hispanic Center thousands of Latin American illegal aliens are returning to their homelands. So, what's the problem with immigration policy? It's that we still don't have one! The shooting of 14 immigrants in New York by an out of work American citizen underscores the need to do something constructive about the immigrants in our midst.

Immigration priorities in Washington are not high because of other more vital domestic and global concerns. Yet Cecile Munoz, a White House spokeswoman, stated that "President Obama plans to begin addressing the country's immigration system this year, including looking for a path for illegal immigrants to become legal." (New York Times, April 9, 2009.) However, in the Texas Legislature measures are being considered. For example one Texas bill proposes a sort of "Bracero Program." Although it would need federal approval, it would greatly help Texas farmers. But some bills are so mean-spirited that you would think that none of the author's ancestors were immigrants.

Locally LWFH has been enlisting the support of other local organizations for the LWVUS position. Recently Alice May Berthelsen and Louis Whittington made a presentation on the current immigration situation and the League's position to a local branch of the American Association of University Women.

Hopefully, most of us recognize that our hybrid strength arises from our immigrant origins. Both former President Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy have endorsed this view.

Our latest Honorary Life Member comes to us from Dallas, welcome to Mary Jane Reynolds. Her address is 12451 Shepherds Ridge Dr, Houston, TX 77077-2929. She joins our other eight "Lifers" who are Betty Jane Baker, Olga Bennett, Alice May Berthelsen, Hana Ginzburg, Kay Guenther, Gloria Herman, Marjorie Love, and Bunny Mason.

Hero Awards

At the January Board Meeting it was decided to honor each month a member or members who have gone above and beyond in some way for the League of Women Voters of the Houston Area. Laura Blackburn, President, has announced the following winners at the past General Meetings and presented them with their award as a token of appreciation.

The list of the current honorees is:

January ... Peggy Hill for flying in from California to attend Local Program Planning.

February ... Alice May Berthelsen for supporting Millie Whittington with the Immigration study.

March ... Jackie Alfred and Judy Hollinger for their work on the 2009 Repast.

April ... Pat Downing, Gwen Essinger, Ann Herbage, Betty Oertel, Barb Swartz, Ernestine Dansby, Shirley Gibson, Marlene Lobberecht, Mary Morgan, Beanie Adolph, Laura Blackburn and Jan Wilbur for attending Lobby Day 2008 in Austin.

These names will be listed on a *Hero of the Month* ribbon in the office.

Will you be the honoree in May, September, October, November, December?



At April Meeting on Air Quality, Karl Pepple, and Paul Hobby answer questions.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

May 14	89th LWV Houston Area Annual Meeting
May 22	Board Meeting, League office, 10 a.m.
May 27	VOTER Deadline

City Hall Observers

continued from page 2

April 8

Today City Council began with the Mayor's report from Assistant Police Chief M. Traler and Assistant Police Chief J. Trevino. Assistant Police Chief Traler began by stating that the crime problem in apartment units had long been a major issue in the city. This was addressed by ordinance by deciding to look at these apartment units as major public health problems. The city picked 25 large complexes and gave the apartment owners citations for public health violations, hoping they would clean up the units so they wouldn't attract crime. These units were assigned to officers who would monitor and enforce the laws for two years to see if this concentrated effort would produce favorable results. The crime rate in these last two years improved 28 percent.

Assistant Chief Trevino spoke about another major crime fighting effort instituted by the city, signing up convenience stores to put in surveillance equipment and provide a clear view of the cash register. They also had to have drop safes for cash. The police task force provided training and the stores would place a decal near the front of the store. These stores that have done this so far will be in compliance with the ordinance by January 2010. So far 700 stores out of the estimated 2000 stores have signed up. The police are taking care of these two areas of crime by using store front police headquarters which are visible to the community.

Questions came from Councilmember Lawrence after thanking the Assistant Chiefs for their efforts. She asked whether we have enough personnel to inspect the store fronts and to enforce these ordinances. The mayor responded that Doug Anders was on the job seeing that these issues are addressed.

Councilmember Johnson asked how the criminal mischief issues are being addressed. He said that young children are doing quite a bit of damage. Chief Traler said that the city is working with the community to get after school activities for the children. They are trying to reach out to youth but need the community and schools behind them.

Councilmember Sullivan asked what was being done when the city apartments backed up to apartments in other jurisdictions. Assistant Chief Traler said that we are getting this addressed in the county.

All the councilmembers were very thankful to the police and the taskforces that worked so hard on these crime ridden areas producing such positive results.

We welcome these new and returning members:

Sheila Blake

Marjorie Milby

Donald Nelson

Lucile G. Bridges

Kassim Panjwani & Layla Singh-Panjwani

Martha Frances

Aimee Mobley Turney

Joanna Friesen

Alice Williams

Alice Ginsburgh

Note this change

Mr. & Mrs. Wall Heitz

Hedwig Weatherford

Marjorie Lolthouse

Thanks to the following for their contributions:

Kip Murray

Dora Nichols and Madeleine Appel
in memory of Harold Friedman

The Houston VOTER is published 10 times per year by the League of Women Voters-Houston Area. This newsletter is provided as part of yearly membership dues. Non-members may purchase a subscription. Contact the office for details.

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May Unit Info

In May the units usually hold end-of-year social events. Call the unit leader for information.

Southwest Day

Rhoda Haddox
(713)667-5952

West Harris Co

Joan Golding, 281-596-0935

Citywide Evening

Jackie Friedman
(713)521-0702

Spring Branch

Kay Guenther
(713)464-6870

Midwest

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

New Member/Saturday Unit

Judy Hollinger
(713)665-4458

First look at the new office! Pat Downing in her office (right) and the conference room (below). We're almost settled in - come by and see us at the new location.



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.