

The Houston VOTER

League of Women Voters-Houston Area • November/December 2009

November General Meeting

Public Defender Study

Friday, November 13

11:30 to 1:00

UH Law Center, Krost Hall

Speakers

David Mitcham

Juanita Barner

Judge Shawna L. Reagin

Ray Hill

Box lunch, \$15, includes parking

Deadline is Nov. 10

Send a check or call the League office
with your credit card.

Phone 713-784-2923

Study on the Public Defender Office

Leslie Taylor

The League of Women Voters study on the Public Defender Office has proved to be extremely current. On September 29, 2009, the Harris County Commissioners Court approved the concept of creating a public defender office and referred the issue to the new Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to implement a plan for inclusion in the 2010 fiscal year budget.

Come to the general meeting November 13 to hear four speakers explain the current system for providing indigent defense, and also give views on what a public defender office could mean for Harris County and the accused. The general meeting will be at the University of Houston Law Center in Krost Hall. Our host and co-sponsor is the Center for Children Law & Policy. Please arrive no later than 11:30 a.m. at Krost Hall. The program should begin at 11:45.

Our panel of speakers includes David Mitcham and Juanita Barner, both experienced criminal defense attorneys. They have differing views on whether the creation

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President's Message

By Nancy Parra

Since this issue of the VOTER is being mailed early to include the Voters Guide, I am writing my message before any of our October events have taken place. I know, however, that "Rally on the Green: Discovering Houston's Leadership" is going to be a fantastic event. Many of our members have volunteered their time to making it successful, and I want to thank all of them for their hard work. I especially want to thank Ann Wood, Chair of the Debates and Forums Committee, for her perseverance, time, and dedication in making this happen.

I also want to encourage everyone to attend our November general meeting Friday, November 13, on the Public Defender Study. Leslie Taylor and Ernestine Dansby, co-chairs of the Public Defender Study, together with the committee they put together, have done a very thorough and professional study of the subject. The committee studied approaches to indigent defense, how Harris County provides indigent defense, and the effectiveness of appointments as compared to a PDO. Be sure to read the Facts & Issues as we will be taking consensus at the Unit meetings.

Also important at this time is an issue which we all should be reading about and advocating for: health care reform. Mary G. Wilson, President of LWVUS, sent a message to the national membership stating that "We are reaching a critical point in the health care debate. The League is calling for bold reforms that guarantee universal coverage and quality care, and keep health care costs under control." We are at a critical point, and I want to urge each of you to call or write your senators and representatives about this issue. Mary also stated that we should dispute the myths being spread about what is involved in the health care reform plan.

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December Holiday Luncheon

Friday, December 11 at 11:30AM

at the Doubletree Hotel downtown.

Our guests will be the newly elected
city/county officials.

More details to follow.

INSIDE

- Fall Garage Sale
- Rally on the Green
- Unit Meetings

... and more

County Commissioner's Court

Leslie Taylor Reporting

The Harris County Commissioners Court considered the Mid-Year Budget Review presented by Dr. Richard Raycraft and various department representatives on September 29, 2009. The review session, scheduled to last one hour, extended for three hours. The Hospital District reported that it was focusing back onto the plan it had before the board had explored the possibility of purchasing a hospital from the Memorial Hermann Healthcare System. Talks on that purchase fell through. The three priorities for the hospital district are (1) primary care through its 13 clinics, (2) prevention, and (3) awareness/health education. As the district provides more primary care, the need for referrals to specialists increases. The district, therefore, seeks to acquire more facilities where this specialty care can take place. The district will begin the process of providing a clinic building at its Holly Hall property to provide outpatient service for radiation therapy, diagnostic imaging, and specialty clinics. The cost of the two-phased project is estimated to be \$133 million.

Dr. Raycraft reported that the expenditures out of the general fund were over projections in the budget. Increased expenditures over projections in the first six months were mainly in the Administration of Justice group, particularly for adult detention. The Flood Control budget is on track as planned.

The one cent ad valorem tax will generate less available funds than last year and is expected to generate less for a while. Dr. Raycraft warned the court that it needs to plan carefully for operations and capital requirements during the balance of this fiscal year and in preparation for the next fiscal period. In other words, it is time to tighten belts. The county cannot count on continued growth in revenues and expenditures, but must budget for decline. Dr. Raycraft recommended that no new positions be created between October 2009 and the end of March 2010. The court was also advised to delay consideration of a cost of living adjustment for positions until an evaluation can be made of available resources for the FY 2010-2011 budget.

The proposed tax rates were so close to the previous year that the law did not require public hearings for approval, but the court decided to call a public hearing on tax rates at the next Commissioners Court meeting to give the public an opportunity to comment before setting the rates.

The court engaged in a long discussion with representatives from the Sheriff's Department regarding a request to add 60 detention officer positions and 20 medical staff positions for jail operations. A similar request was granted not long ago. Commissioner Eversole understood that many detention officers were promoted to the academy or to patrol positions and questioned the need for another 60 new positions. The Sheriff's Department is also seeking to use some floors of the old 1301 jail building for transition programs for former

The Council started today with two ordinances thanking some people for their work on a voluntary board.

Then the controller's report noting that we are continuing to have a shortfall. The sales tax was down as well as all other sources of revenue.

The Mayor began his report by saying that Councilmember Clutterbuck is convening her budget committee on October 13, 2009 to give an overview of the city's finances so that the voters will have the opportunity to make educated choices for council members, controllers, and mayor. All the candidates for controller will probably be involved.

The Mayor went on to say Houston is taking a green stand not only to save the planet but also to save expenses.

He is not going to raise rates to cover the crisis but he is going to ask the city to water less and to plant hardy grass and flowers. He is also going to see how we can burn trash to provide energy to run the water plants. The city will have to build fewer water plants and also save water if we do this. He is hiring two consultants to investigate the issue and install the necessary supplies.

inmates who are homeless or have mental health needs. The feasibility and costs of converting the space is being studied.

The amount that subdivisions and Municipal Utility Districts pay for patrol service by deputy constables will increase gradually.

Plans are being made for the Harris County Medical Examiner's office to gradually take over the DNA caseload of the Houston Police Department. It will take a long time to eliminate the backlog in the police department crime lab. A consultant has studied the county's DNA lab and concluded that it has linked hundreds of previously convicted persons to DNA recovered from burglaries, more than any other lab in Texas. A national study has concluded that DNA analysis is a cost-effective tool for investigating and prosecuting high-volume property crimes such as home and commercial burglaries and car thefts and car break-ins. DNA testing in these types of cases "saved money, lowered crime rates, and removed a substantial number of habitual criminals from the community."

Several ministers appeared before the court regarding the Public Defender Office and urged the court to stop studying and begin implementing creation of the office. Commissioners Court approved the concept of creating a public defender office staffed to match the requests of the various courts that are willing to use a public defender in their courtrooms. More planning is needed to get the office in the next year's budget.

Several other citizens appeared to express their concern that the Sheriff's department may sign an extension of an agreement with ICE under a program called 287g. The concern is that immigrants with no criminal record are being

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Fall Garage Sale

Mark your calendars for Saturday, November 14. The League is having a Fall Garage Sale on the parking lot of the office, 4001 N. Shepherd. The time will be from 9:00 A.M. until 2:00 P.M.

Start saving items that you will want to donate. Feel free to price them at the value that will bring in the most money for the League. Surely, there are many treasures among you that can be donated and very much appreciated by those who purchase them.

We will be collecting the small items at the office the week of the sale and not before. Due to space allocation, we are requesting that any large items be brought the morning of the sale.

There will be many volunteers needed to work the sale, so save the date and plan on being there. You will be greatly appreciated as always.

Look for further information to come in the weeks ahead.

The census is coming!

By Barb Swartz

In 2010 the census questionnaire is being shortened to a quick ten question survey. It will be mailed out in February and March 2010 and also available in selected sites across the county. The return date is April 2010, but don't wait until then to mail it back—it might get lost. In May through July, census takers will visit households that did not return the questionnaire by mail. December 31, 2010, the Census Bureau delivers population counts to the president. In May 2011, the Census Bureau completes delivery of redistricting data to the states.

It is important that everyone responds next year as much is dependent upon the results. Services to children and adults, housing assistance, adult education programs, government budget planning, and decision making at all levels of government. Don't throw it away.

Need instant information?

**Click on:
lwvhouston.org**

Be part of the Channel 2 Election Day Hotline

Once again KPRC Channel 2 is featuring LWV members answering studio phones on election day. It's a great way to serve the community by answering questions like "Am I registered?", "Where do I vote?" "Who's on the ballot?" and more. We guarantee you won't be bored! Contact Lula Blake for more information or to sign up. lueb@sbcglobal.net or 713-780-0250.

The League Makes a Difference!

By Alice May Berthelsen

The Houston league has conducted elections for the councils of public housing projects for many years. By law, the projects elect a governing council with a third party present certifying the election. The League of Women Voters is a qualified third party! As it has evolved, we conduct the elections. Sometimes, there is a contest on the ballot. Sometimes, nobody is on the ballot! This can be a challenge, but always interesting.

The projects are located all over the city, and are all are attractive and impressive. Ann Wood chairs this effort and coordinates with the Houston Housing Authority. This volunteer effort ranks up there in satisfaction with registering voters at the citizenship ceremonies!

Reduced Voter Mailings

Due to escalating costs for mailing and printing, 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. Even though we will not be printing the Voter every month, we update the Voter 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.

September General Meeting



County Judge Ed Emmet



Laura Blackburn introducing the speaker



Shirley Gibson & daughter at registration

Rally on the Green: Everything we expected and more

By Ann Wood

Rally on the Green: Discovering Houston's Leadership was the Houston League's first foray into the world of "big events" and while dreary weather forced a last minute relocation from "the Green" to "the Grove" the feeling at the end of the day was one of success. We had two terrific Candidate Forums and a very busy Candidate Reception with over 40 City Council, HCC and HISD candidates and their enthusiastic supporters attending. The rain kept the usually bustling Discovery Green Park crowds at home but a few brave souls faced both the rain and the traffic to come meet their candidates and hear what their next Mayor and Controller had to say.

Overnight the Rally went from an outdoor event with lots of room for political fun to a very compressed space but the League volunteers did an amazing job adapting the decorations to find a place for everyone. Channel 2 fit an entire studio into the Vista Room and still managed seating for 100+ people. Our moderators, Amy Davis and Mary Benton did a great job encouraging the candidates to go beyond the pat responses that result from participating in scores of forum.

Our corporate sponsors showed up to support the effort. Representatives from AT&T and Apache Corp were in the crowd. Community Partners, US Census Bureau, Asian Chamber of Commerce, Houston Votes and NALEO (National Association of Latino Elected



You can see the Controller forum on KPRC's website at: <http://www.click2houston.com/video/21201251/index.html>.

and Appointed Officials) brought displays and didn't let the cramped quarters dim their enthusiasm. Many Leaguer were in attendance first as volunteers and then as audience.

No event this large can succeed without the hard work and dedication of a small group of people and the many hands of a larger group. The Rally certainly could not have. Special recognition needs to go out to the hardest working and easiest to get along with committee imaginable. Judy Viebig, Georgia Richardson, Bob Singleton, Alice May Berthelsen, Barb Swartz, Peggy Hill, Ann Herbage, and Judy Hollinger. A special nod needs to go to Marlene Cohn who spent the entire day "tweeting" the Rally's progress and to Sharon Cunningham and Leslie

Taylor who had the tedious and stressful task of keeping time during the forums. A big "Thank you" needs to go out to all the people at Discovery Green and The Grove. Their cooperation and assistance turned a near disaster into a great day. The list of people who made the Rally possible could fill this edition of the Voter. Thanks to each and every one of them.

The Mayoral Forum was broadcast on KPRC Channel 2 twice; Saturday, Oct. 10 at 9 p.m. and Sunday, Oct. 25 at 11 a.m. The next Mayor and Controller are speaking to Houston's issues in these programs so make some time to listen before you decide who gets your vote.

Yes, Rally on the Green did discover Houston's leadership both at the podium and behind the scenes.



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.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Nov. 3	Election Day
Nov. 10	Briefing 2 p.m., League office
Nov. 13	General Meeting UH Law Center, Krost Hall Public Defender Office
Nov. 16-21	Unit Meetings Consensus on Public Defender Office
Nov. 20	Board Meeting 10 a.m., League Office
Dec. 2	VOTER Deadline
Dec. 11	Holiday Luncheon (see page 1)
Dec. 15-21	Units—Holiday Social call your Unit Leader
Dec. 16	VOTER Mailing

Thanks to the following for their contributions:

Frances Burford
Bert & Joan Golding
Nancy Hentschel
Kathy Hubbard
Ada Montare

Margie O'Conner
Lavie & M. K. Panuwani
Khator Renu
Barb Swartz
Leo Vasquez III

General Meeting

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of a public defender office will improve the quality of representation for indigents in the long term. Ray Hill, a local activist and advocate for the incarcerated, will speak for the "consumer." Finally, Judge Shawna L. Reagin will be available to explain the proposal that she and other judges have approved for the initial public defender office.

The Facts and Issues is enclosed with this Voter. It may also be viewed on the League website where you may take advantage of the numerous links to important and very current studies on indigent defense nationwide, as well as additional local information that could not be squeezed into the Facts and Issues.

Pres. Message

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Her message raised concerns among some of our members that the League is taking a partisan stand in denouncing those who are spreading false information about the health care plan. I think the problem arises because our positions on health care reform were proposed before they became associated with a particular party. Unfortunately, the debate over health care reform has led to false allegations about what is in the plan; we do need to deal with this and try to arrive at a correct interpretation of what the plan involves.

See you at our General Meeting November 13!

We welcome these new and returning members:

John Buckley Jr. _____ Coline McGehee _____

_____ Margaret Newell _____

JoAnn Egeland _____

_____ Helen Shoup _____

Harold Kron _____

County Court Observer

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stopped for minor traffic offenses, put in jail and then deported. They said that the program is expensive to local communities and ineffective. The Sheriff is expected to request court approval at the next Commissioners Court

meeting on October 13, 2009. Judge Emmett recommended that the citizens' concerns be expressed to the Sheriff and that the proper time to address the court is October 13 if the item appears on the court's agenda.

November General meeting

Directions to Krost Hall from I-45 South (downtown)

- exit Spur 5, turn right on University Dr.
- turn right on Calhoun, turn left into UH Entrance 19
- turn right into parking lot 19B
- the Law Center has several buildings
- standing at the statue, Krost Hall will be in the front on your left

Law students will meet LWV cars at the entrance to lots 19B and 19C to hand out parking passes. An alternative parking lot is lot 18A, but you will have to get your pass at the meeting hall.

A campus map is available at: http://www.uh.edu/campus_map/buildings/KH.php.

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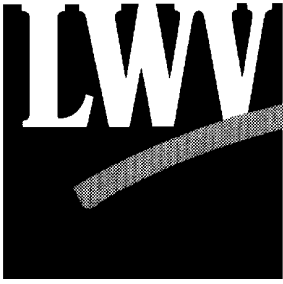
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November Unit Meetings

Third Monday, Nov. 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

Third Tuesday, Nov. 17
Spring Branch, 9:30 a.m.

Home of Margaret Kolodzie
9839 Warwana Dr.
Margaret Kolodzie
(713)465-1068

Third Thursday, Nov. 19
Midwest, 10 a.m.

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

Third Saturday, Nov. 21
New Member/Saturday
Unit, 10 a.m.

League office
4001 N. Shepherd, #213
Houston, 77018
Shirley Gibson
(281)493-2875

Pick a Unit
Meeting that
is convenient
and attend.

It's the
League at its
grass roots best!

The consensus questions for units are:

1. Does the current system need improvement, and if so, how?
2. What are the benefits of a PDO over our current system?
3. What are the benefits of our current system over the benefits of a system that includes a PDO?
4. Should Harris County set up a PDO or leave the current system in place?



New Member Unit

By Shirley Gibson

The New Member Unit met on September 19, with seven members present; Jere Pfester, Nancy Hentschel, Layla Panjwani, Diane Cates, Beanie Adolph, and Shirley Gibson.

We discussed the Ethics Questions and a lively and timely discussion followed. Time was up before we knew it. In fact, we continued our discussion long past the time. I had fun and I believe the others did, too. We were somewhat disturbed that our new Ethics Statement lacked teeth but we are taking a wait and see attitude until it is time for the legislature to meet again. We will again try to get a bill passed.