



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

Capitol Report 2012

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Overview

The first week of the legislative session is over and already there has been action on issues of concern to the League of Women Voters of Florida. The week began with Governor Rick Scott's second state of the state address. Scott told lawmakers that the economy in the state is improving. His speech focused mainly on what he has said are his top three priorities this year; passage of a jobs creation package, automobile insurance reform and adding an additional \$1 billion into next years education budget. Governor Scott seemed more comfortable with this speech than he was last year and he thanked lawmakers for helping him in his efforts to create jobs.

Scott's pledge to improve education spending will be a difficult task this year and it became even more difficult as a revenue estimating conference confirmed this week that the state is facing a \$2 billion revenue shortfall. Scott wants to pump an additional \$1 billion into education spending which actually would just maintain existing funding levels since the state used one-time funds last year to prop up the budget. Scott proposes to get the additional \$1 billion through big cuts in Medicaid payments to hospitals. In the Democratic response to Scott's speech, Senator Minority Leader Nan Rich and House Minority Leader Ron Saunders criticized Scott's proposal for pitting school children and teachers against pregnant women and sick kids, the two groups most dependent on Medicaid.

There was also plenty of action this week on the issue of redistricting. Last Friday, the League of Women Voters of Florida, Common Cause Florida and Democracia (now part of the National Council of La Raza) submitted its version of Florida redistricting maps for Congress and the state Senate. The groups also sent a letter to Senate Reapportionment Committee Chair Don Gaetz asking him to introduce the maps as amendments so they could be on the table for discussion during this week's committee meeting on Wednesday. Senator Gaetz did not file the maps as amendments and at the meeting several members of the committee attacked the League and the other groups for not submitting the maps sooner. The League responded by saying it had given the Senate the benefit of the doubt that it would comply with the requirements of amendments 5&6, and only when it became apparent that the Senate maps did not comply, did we draw our own maps.

The House Reapportionment Subcommittees also met this week and narrowed down the number of maps it will choose from. The full House Reapportionment Committee is scheduled to meet on January 20th and again on the 27th when they are expected to select the maps that will be considered by the full House.

It appears the legislature will be preoccupied this year with two major issues that are not necessarily League priorities. Those issues include the expansion of casino gambling and automobile insurance reform. Both issues have generated a big increase in campaign fundraising for legislators because there are deep-pocket special interests involved. The House and Senate are taking different approaches to each of these issues and it's likely they will not be resolved until the end of the session, if at all.

There are other bills that have been filed that address issues that are priorities for the League. There are a whole slew of anti-abortion bills that have been already filed this year including one that outlaws "race and gender-based" abortions. There are also bills dealing with immigration, clean water issues including a repeal of the statewide septic tank inspection requirement and an expansion of the school voucher program allowing students to receive state funding to attend private schools. The League will be monitoring all of these issues as the session progresses.

The League did voice its support this week for Senate Bill 206 by Senator Joe Negron which would give Florida citizens a right to be heard at government meetings. The measure was filed in response to a pair of appellate court rulings that said Florida's open government law requires officials to meet in public, but does not give citizens a right to speak at those meetings. The legislation would give the public that right with certain limitations. The League believes this bill would encourage citizens to be active and engaged with their government.

Good government issues that may be addressed this year include ethics and the Public Service Commission. Sen. Paula Dockery and Rep. Fred Costello have filed the "Ethical Practices Act of 2012" that would prohibit legislators from voting upon, participating in or attempting to influence the passage of any legislation that would result in their enjoying any special private gain for themselves or their relatives. The bill was a recommendation by the recent Statewide Grand Jury on Public Corruption. Sen. Mike Fasano is sponsoring a good bill (SB 212) that requires Public Service Commission members to abide by the judicial code of conduct while conducting communications and utility rate proceedings. Both bills were filed during the 2011 legislative session but failed to make it out of committee. While no major election reform legislation has been introduced yet, Sen. Nan Rich has once again filed SB 516, which would expand the list of sites where early voting can be held.

One final piece of news this week that would be of interest to League members is the resignation of Florida's Secretary of State Kurt Browning. Browning told Governor Scott that he will stay on until February 17th. Browning is well regarded for his understanding of election administration, but he is also been a strong defender of the controversial elections

law passed last year that has been characterized as an attempt at voter suppression. The League has filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of that law.

I would like to take this opportunity to personally appeal to League members to join us in Tallahassee for the 2012 legislative Summit. I have said before how valuable it is to our lobbying efforts to have you here in Tallahassee speaking to your local Senators and Representatives. Your presence is a powerful reminder that they were elected by voters like yourselves and that you expect them to listen when you take the trouble to come here and talk with them about our priorities and concerns. In addition to the serious work there are lots of fun events that are planned and we hope to see many of you in Tallahassee beginning Tuesday, February 21st. Please visit the League's website at <http://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?oeidk=a07e5b49arf870bd29c&llr=jhigmrda> for more details.

As you can see, it's sure to be an interesting and exciting legislative session and one in which the League of Women Voters of Florida will be very active. We will be asking for your help to lobby for and against issues that the League believes are critical. Thank you in advance for your support of our lobbying efforts.

League Priority Issues

The League has set three program areas for the 2012 legislative session, including Government, Education and Social Policy.

Government: Promote an open government that is responsive to the people of the state.

- Finance and Taxation: Support a state fiscal structure that is equitable in its distribution of tax responsibility and responsive to public needs.
- Reapportionment: Actively promote and support the reapportionment process.
- Ethics: Promote the strengthening of the Florida Commission on Ethics, including the areas of independence, subpoena power and the ability to levy fines and initiate an investigation.
- Election Law: Support greater flexibility in the selection of early voting sites.

Education: Support a free public school system for Florida with high standards for student achievement and with equality of educational opportunity for all that is financed adequately by the state through an equitable funding formula.

- Promote adequate funding of public education with no use of public funding for the expansion of funding of private education through a voucher program.
- Promote the extension of public school testing of student achievement to private schools, charter schools and any institutions that receive state funding.

Social Policy: Secure equal rights and equal opportunity for all. Promote social and economic justice and the health and safety of all Americans.

■ **Health Care:** Support implementation of the federal Health Care Reform Law in Florida, emphasizing access for all and control of costs.

■ **Immigration:** Support the rights of legal immigrants to prevention or reduction of poverty, a minimum basic level of health care at affordable costs, the well-being of children and families and access to free public schools with federal and state financial assistance to communities disproportionately impacted by immigration.

Get Involved!

Ben Wilcox is the League's professional lobbyist for the 2012 legislative session. We are still looking for folks to participate in the Lobbying Corps, so please contact Marilyn Wills (marilynnwills@msn.com) or Rebecca Sager (rsager@music.org) if you are interested.

Updates on League legislative issues will be provided on a regular basis through Capitol Report, which is published every week during the session. Important information may also be accessed at www.leg.state.fl.us.

Watch for your Capitol Report each Friday of the session for news on priority issues and what you can do to help. For updates on or copies of proposed legislation, call legislative information at 1-800-342-1827 or visit the Florida Online Sunshine homepage at www.leg.state.fl.us. For more information about the League's advocacy, check out www.TheFloridaVoter.org