



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF FLORIDA

Capitol Report 2011

March 25, 2011

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Overview

It's the end of the third week of the 2011 legislative session and just in time, the League of Women Voters of Florida brought in the cavalry. This week the League held its annual Legislative Seminar and biennial Convention in Tallahassee. It started with a dinner on the 22nd floor of the Capitol honoring Ellen Freidin of Fair Districts Florida and celebrating the passage of Amendments 5 and 6. On Thursday, League members from around the state spent the afternoon lobbying their legislators and advocating the League's position on the many issues of concern this year.

Work continues in both the House and the Senate on the one bill the legislature must pass; the budget. The final revenue estimating conference released its numbers for the coming budget year and the projected deficit grew from \$3.6 to \$3.7 billion; not good news for legislators who are looking at more cuts to an already depleted budget. The budget leaders in both houses have given the subcommittees their allocations and the work to balance the budget now begins in earnest. The League will participate with other groups in a press conference next Monday to protest some of the more egregious budget cuts.

There was also action this week on one of the League's top priorities; the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR). With the Senate Bill 958 still residing in House messages, the House Finance and Tax Committee held a workshop to begin discussion of its version of TABOR. TABOR would place a formula to limit revenue growth in Florida in the state Constitution. The formula is based on the rate of inflation and population growth. In Colorado, the only state that has tried TABOR, the results were disastrous. It forced drastic cuts to education, health, public safety and infrastructure.

During the House committee workshop, the Chair, Representative Steve Precourt indicated that he wanted the Committee to consider expanding the reach of the Senate Bill to include limits on local government revenue as well as state revenue. Those speaking against TABOR included the AARP and LWVF President Deirdre Macnab. No vote was taken at this workshop, but it will likely be voted on next week when the committee meets again. The League is urging its members to contact their state Representative now regarding this legislation. **Please visit** <http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/representatives.aspx> **to find your Representative and urge him or her to vote NO on Senate Joint Resolution 958!**

Also this week, the first major bill to be passed by the legislature this year, Senate Bill 736, was signed into law by Governor Rick Scott. It's a revised version of last year's Senate Bill 6 dealing with teacher tenure and merit pay. The bill eliminates tenure for public school teachers and requires that 50% of a teacher's evaluation be based on student progress on tests including the FCAT. It also creates a system of merit pay for teachers who do well on their evaluations. Critics complain that the bill does not provide funding for the merit pay raises.

Another issue of concern to the League became law this week without the Governor's signature. Last year, former Governor Crist vetoed a bill allowing legislative leaders to create new campaign finance accounts within the political parties where they could raise unlimited contributions year-round; even during the legislative session. These so-called "leadership funds" are currently banned in the state, but legislators have been using the political parties to get around the ban. On Thursday, both houses of the legislature voted to override Crist's veto and Florida's legislative leaders now have new and extremely powerful avenues to raise special interest campaign money.

Separate versions of Medicaid reform legislation continue to make their way through both the House and Senate. In the House, a rewrite of the state's \$22 billion Medicaid program cleared the Budget committee, but not before Republican members added a provision making it tougher for patients to sue doctors. Medicaid patients who are injured due to medical malpractice would be limited to a \$300,000 award under the amendment.

In the Senate, similar legislation (SB 1972) is moving through the committee process. The House and Senate bills differ in the details, but both would move the majority of the state's 2.9 million Medicaid clients to HMO-style plans.

House legislation to reform how the state manages growth now has a bill number. House Bill 7129 called "The Community Planning Act" would essentially "gut" state growth management requirements for cities and counties. It would undercut the rights of citizens to appeal inappropriate local government planning decisions, weaken the ability of local governments to charge developers for the costs of new roads and schools, allow large-scale development without any certainty that conservation lands will be preserved and seriously curtail state review of local plan amendments. The Senate is expected to develop similar legislation, but for the time being the League is urging its members to contact their representatives and urge them to vote "No" on House Bill 7129.

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/representatives.aspx>

There are at least 18 bills somewhere in the legislative process addressing women's reproductive rights. Three of the bills made it through a House committee this week. One requires a woman seeking an abortion to have an ultrasound and be asked if she wants to view it, before having the abortion. A similar measure last year was vetoed by former Governor Charlie Crist. Other bills moving through the legislature include one that would limit third trimester abortions and require abortion clinics be owned by physicians. Another would prohibit private insurers from covering abortions if the policy is paid for using any public money. The League is closely monitoring these bills.

Other issues the League is watching closely include clean water issues, reform of the Judiciary, ethics and healthcare.

And finally, the criminal trial of former House Speaker Ray Sansom abruptly ended on Friday after the state dropped its case. Sansom and his friend and campaign contributor Ray Odom were charged with conspiring to rig a \$6 million airport hanger, purportedly for Northwest Florida State College, when Sansom was the House Budget Chairman. The state dropped the case in return for Sansom and Odom agreeing to pay \$103,000 each to the College for money it spent designing the hanger.

The defense in this case argued that Sansom and Odom were basically conducting business as usual in the state Capitol. Odom was merely lobbying for a special project in Sansom's district. And Sansom was merely bringing home the bacon for his constituents. In dropping the case, the state seems to be admitting that this kind of legislative corruption is legal and really is "business as usual."

Thanks very much to the League members who came to Tallahassee this week and lobbied their legislators! It is a great help in our lobbying efforts. And this year, we need all the help we can get. Thank you very much everyone for your support.

Now that the 2011 legislative session is underway, you will be receiving Capitol Report on a weekly basis to keep you apprised of new developments. The League of Women Voters of Florida anticipates a very active session. We will be asking for your help to lobby for and against issues that the League believes are critical.

League Priority Issues

The LWVF has set four program areas for 2011, including Government, Education, Social Policy and Natural Resources.

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

- **Equitable Taxation**: The League supports tax legislation that does not jeopardize local service, addresses infrastructure deficits, and removes unfair tax exemptions that affect governments' ability to serve citizens.
- **Redistricting Reform**: The League supports single-member election districts that are equal in population, provide access for minorities, are compact and, when possible, take local characteristics such as political and geographical boundaries into consideration.
- **Citizen Initiatives**: For the past four sessions, the League has fought against passage of new restrictions on the citizens' initiative process. As bills addressing citizen initiatives arise; the League will oppose bills that increase the moneyed interests' strangle-hold on the initiative process and the legislative process and, where appropriate, advance the idea of a citizen statutory initiative.

■ Elections: The League supports legislation that promotes stricter election audits and would give the Supervisors of Elections more flexibility in selecting early voting sites.

Education: Priorities are Funding, Accountability and Civic Education.

■ The League supports legislation that provides for a free public school system 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.

Social Policy: Priority is Health Care.

■ The League supports measures to implement Florida health care in a manner consistent with the LWVUS position on health care reform.

Natural Resources: Priorities are resource management, land use, energy, freshwater resources, coastal management, environmental protection, public participation, and agriculture.

Get Involved

Ben Wilcox is the League's professional lobbyist for the 2011 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 further information, check out the *Florida Voter* newsletter, available at www.TheFloridaVoter.org. 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.