

Denton VOTER

*The League of Women Voters of Denton, Texas
Established 1961*

P.O. Box 424945 TWU Station
Denton, Texas 76204

www.lwvdenton.org

March 2009

Sue Smith, President
Sondra Ferstl, VOTER Editor

CALENDAR

Thursday, March 12, 7 p.m. Year Round School in the Denton Independent School District: Worth Reconsidering? Speaker: Dalton Gregory. Environmental Education Science and Technology Building (EESAT), Room 176 on the University of North Texas campus, Hickory at Avenue C. Come a few minutes early to get a hang tag for your car from Peg La Point before parking.

Friday, March 20, 2 – 4 p.m. Meet and Greet **Mary Wilson, President of LWVUS**, at the Communities Foundation of Texas, 5500 Caruth Haven Lane, Dallas 75225. Hosted by LWV-Dallas. Call Sue Smith if interested in carpooling to the meeting (387-1016).

Thursday, March 26, 7 p.m. Redistricting in Texas. EESAT Building, Room 176, UNT. Come early for parking hang tag.

Saturday, March 28, 12 noon. Luncheon Celebrating Women. Sponsored by LWV-Plano/Collin County at Ralph & Kacoo's, 401 Central Expressway S, Allen, Texas. Cost is \$22 and reservations must be made by Friday, March 20. Contact Sondra Ferstl if interested in catching a ride to this event (383-3775)

Sunday, April 5, 3 p.m. Board Meeting. Home of Peg La Point, 1900 Highland Park Circle.

A YEAR ROUND SCHOOL IN THE DISD

In an attempt to contain the costs of building more schools, Denton ISD Central Services introduced to its school board the year round calendar. The faculty of Lee elementary school elected to "field test" the year round calendar and began its 1995-1996 school year with the adjusted schedule.

Dalton Gregory was principal of Lee during the years of an alternate calendar, which continued until 2001. He brings to the League of Women Voters and the general public, a tale of the school for all seasons.

Joins us Thursday, March 12, 7 p.m. in Room 176 of the EESAT Bldg., UNT, as we study the problems and possibilities of operating under a schedule which was not shared by any other Denton ISD campus. Is this an experiment which might be re-introduced? Do its problems outweigh the advantages? We invite your participation.

Maggie Dodd, Director

FINANCE DRIVE UPDATE

As of March 1, LWV-Denton has received financial support from 8 members and 4 non-members totaling \$990. We have forwarded to LWV-Texas Education Fund checks from 4 members and 2 non-members totaling \$725. Let's keep the support coming in.

REDISTRICTING IN TEXAS

LWV-Texas has undertaken a campaign to reform the redistricting process in Texas. As you know, the current method of determining voting districts is highly politicized and controversial. It is hoped that during the current legislative session the League and our allies will influence lawmakers to reform the system. The state League has created good background material, which we include in this *Denton VOTER*. I strongly urge you to read it and to attend the March 28 meeting. At that time we will discuss the issue and encourage action on the part of the membership.

Peg La Point, Program VP

PROPERTY MAINTENANCE CODES DISCUSSED

In February, the League hosted staff from the city for a review of the proposed maintenance codes that are expected to be approved by the City Council. Lincine Bentley, Code Enforcement Coordinator, and Kurt Hansen, Building Official, gave us an excellent overview of the reasons for many of the proposed revisions and how the codes would impact the average citizen.

They were joined by Karen Divinny, the Chair of the Citizen Code Committee. The committee has been meeting for the past year as part of the process and has been responsible for reviewing and approving each provision before it is sent to the City Council for review and approval. It was an extremely informative and interesting meeting and we were grateful for the time and effort that has gone into this complicated process.

Peg La Point, Program VP

PRESIDENT'S PODIUM

March is going to be fairly busy month. On the Friday the 20th we will have an opportunity to meet with the LWVUS president. Mary Wilson will be in Dallas for a Meet and Greet sponsored by LWV-Dallas. You should have received a postcard about this event. If you did not, please let me know and I'll send you complete details. Also let me know if you are interested in carpooling.

On Thursday the 12th we will hear from Dalton Gregory about year-round schools. And on the 26th we will discuss redistricting for Texas. See details about both general meetings in this VOTER. You will receive the Annual Meeting VOTER by the end of the month. Please read through it in preparation for our meeting on Saturday, April 25th and of course make plans now to attend.

February was Finance Drive month. I still think it is an achievable goal to have a 100% response from members. If you have not had a chance to reply to the letter, please send your donation, large or small, to LWV-Denton, P.O. Box 424945, Denton, TX 76204 or bring it to the next general meeting.

I know the nominating committee is meeting. Please say "yes" if called. The board is the best place to be in what I think is the best organization in town.

Sue Smith

REDISTRICTING CAN BE IMPROVED IN 2008-2009

Dee Brock, LWV Director, Tyler

Redistricting has been growing in importance as a political problem. From the liberal Common Cause to the conservative CATO Institute, most pundits and activists of all persuasions think taking the process away from party politics would be a positive change. In Texas and many other states, the major stumbling blocks to establishing an independent, nonpolitical

process are the members of the state legislature who are reluctant to give up their traditional hold on drawing new district boundaries. As LWV-Texas and local Leagues begin their campaign for the establishment of an independent Redistricting Commission, here's what you need to know about the way redistricting works now, why we need change, what kind of change are we pushing for, and what's next in our campaign.

Redistricting can be Improved in 2008-2009

Who is responsible now for redrawing district boundaries for the Texas Legislature, the federal House of Representatives, and the Texas Board of Education?

- The Texas Legislature – the Senate Committee of the Whole and the House Committee on Redistricting. Redistricting plans have to pass both houses, and the Governor has veto power over them.
- If the Texas Legislative Committees do not come up with a redistricting plan for the Texas Legislature during the first regular session after each new census report, the Legislative Redistricting Board of Texas composed of five members – Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of House, Attorney General, Comptroller of Public Accounts, and the Commissioner of the General Land Office takes on the task
- If Texas Legislature fails to make the district changes for federal Representatives during the next session of the legislature, the job can be done at a later time in a special session.
- Detailed population data necessary for redistricting must be delivered to states by April 1 of the year following the census. The Texas legislature then has about 60 days during the first regular session to draw and adopt legislative district boundaries.
- As a state listed in Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, Texas must submit all redistricting plans to United States Department of Justice or the federal district court for the District of Columbia for preclearance.

Why is redistricting necessary?

- Districts are supposed to be drawn so that the votes of all citizens are of equal importance.
- Changes in population or in the number of Congressional representatives for the state require redrawing the districts.

What principles govern the drawing of districts?

- Districts must have equal or nearly equal populations.
- Districts must be drawn in a manner that does not have the effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on the basis of race or language group.
- Counties must be preserved within one district if possible.

Why is the League advocating for an independent Redistricting Commission?

- As it stands now, Texas, like most states, places the power to shape the boundaries of political districts into the hands of politicians. That means our elected officials are picking their constituents, rather than the other way around. If the majority party draws the districts, they are most likely to draw them to protect their party's power and to reduce the power of the minority party. Consequently, redistricting has evolved into an electoral instrument that serves to protect and strengthen the incumbency advantage, therefore disempowering voters and undermining democratic accountability.
- Excessive zeal in redistricting to empower a party is very divisive and more than once has led to situations that make it difficult for parties to work together for the good of the state. It is easy for all concerned to look both foolish and vindictive.
- This is the year we need to establish an independent commission so that we will have new procedures in place before the next census.

Why Should We Support Senator Wentworth's bill?

- Senator Jeff Wentworth of San Antonio has been presenting a bill for the establishment of an independent Redistricting Commission for 15 years and in the last two sessions his bill passed the Senate, but was never brought to a vote in the House. This year we can make it happen if we all work together.
- His bill calls for a Redistricting Commission to draw the district lines of the U.S. House of Representatives. Of course, we would like to see this Commission draw the districts for the Texas Legislature and the State Board of Education, too. But passing this bill would be a good step forward and might make it easier to give the commission broader responsibilities later. In addition, we might find a Texas Legislator who would push through amendments to Senator Wentworth's proposal.
- The Wentworth plan calls for a Commission of eight voting members – four Republicans and four Democrats, all chosen by members of the Texas Legislature. None would hold or be running for a political position. This group would select a chair to preside, but never have a vote. Such a structure would force fair and principled redistricting plans, since the process would never be controlled by one party.

What Are Our Next Steps?

Each League needs to convince and commit local leaders to support an independent Redistricting Commission. Each of us needs to write or call our elected officials in support of this legislation.

If you are interested in spearheading an effort to involve the community and local leaders in this effort, contact Peg La Point and she can send you material from the state office that will help you organize a campaign.

Sample letter to your Legislators:

It is in the best interests of Texas and Texans to have an independent Redistricting Commission before we receive the next census report to ensure a fair redrawing of political districts when the report is delivered. To accomplish this goal, we must enact appropriate legislation in the 2009 session of the Texas Legislature to create the Commission.

In the past, the Texas Legislature has redrawn district lines that protect the interests of incumbents of the majority party and defeat candidates from the opposing party, rather than serve voters. Clearly, this method seriously compromises election fairness. Now is the time to enact a plan to deliver district boundaries to ensure that the weight of each vote is relatively the same and that district lines are not drawn to enhance political parties.

Senator Jeff Wentworth, San Antonio, is again sponsoring a bill for an independent Redistricting Commission, and the League of Women Voters of Texas and our local League are supporting his proposal. His bill calls for the Texas Legislature to select four Republicans and four Democrats who are not holding public office or running for a public office to serve on the Commission. The members would select a non-voting chair to run the meetings. In this way, the members would have to come up with a plan that favors neither party unduly.

While Senator Wentworth's bill applies only to the districts for the federal House of Representatives, it still provides an important first step in seeking fairness and justice in drawing election boundaries. Once this plan operates successfully, we believe it will be easier to include all redistricting under the aegis of this new Redistricting Commission in the future. I strongly urge you to support this important legislation. Thank you for your help in making Texas redistricting fairer and more just.