



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

Capitol Report 2012

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Overview

The second week of the legislative session is over and most of the action was focused around redistricting. On Tuesday, the Senate took up its congressional and state Senate maps in a lengthy session that lasted from 10:00 a.m. until 4:45 in the afternoon. In the end, a majority of Democrats crossed party lines to approve the maps by a 36 to 4 vote. One Republican, Senator Paula Dockery, voted against the plans.

Senate President Mike Haridopolos called it one of the Senate's "finest hours" and praised incoming Senate president Don Gaetz who chaired the Reapportionment Committee. Critics complained the maps protect incumbents despite the new constitutional amendments 5 and 6 that prohibit incumbency protection. Senate Minority Leader Nan Rich said the new districts are "tremendously similar" to the districts that were drawn in 2002.

On the Senate floor, members of the majority party were critical of the League and other members of the Fair Districts coalition for not submitting redistricting maps sooner and for not being a constructive participant in the process. The Fair Districts Coalition, which includes the League of Women Voters of Florida, Common Cause Florida and the Latino advocacy organization the National Council of La Raza released a statement in response to the attacks. The statement called the rhetoric about the timing of the League's submission of maps a "smokescreen" to obscure the fact that "the Senate has now passed maps that do not comply with the applicable laws."

The House Reapportionment Committee met on Friday to discuss the three redistricting plans that have been proposed separately for congressional and state House districts. The committee agreed to consider only one plan each for Congress and the state House at its next meeting on January 27th and the Chair of the committee Will Weatherford instructed the members to prepare any amendments they want to sponsor to those designated plans. The meeting happened amidst reports that some members of the House were considering proposing an amended version of the Senate's plan for Senate districts. However, any amendment to the Senate's plan would break a "gentleman's agreement" between Senate Reapportionment Chair Don Gaetz and House Chair Weatherford that each chamber would accept the other's maps for their respective chambers without changes.

There was also dissension this week between the House and Senate over how to develop the state's budget for the next fiscal year. Last week, a revenue estimating conference confirmed that the state is facing a \$2 billion revenue shortfall. Now, a bi-partisan majority of the Florida Senate wants to cut short the regular session in February and come back later in the spring after a "hiatus" to work on the budget in hopes that the revenue forecast will get better. Currently the legislature is scheduled to adjourn March 9th which is about the time the legislative session typically begins. The session started earlier this year because of redistricting.

The push by the Senate to delay the budget has sparked a new battle with the House. House Speaker Dean Cannon has said he sees no reason to delay the budget because there has been no indication that the revenue numbers in March would be any better.

Meanwhile there is some growing bi-partisan support for one of the League's priorities; the collection of state sales taxes from online retail companies. Supporters of the proposal argue that allowing online retailers to avoid paying the state's 6% sales tax amounts to an unfair disadvantage to Florida-based businesses. Despite the new support for the proposal, two key state leaders, Governor Rick Scott and House Speaker Dean Cannon, remain opposed to it.

The legislature continued to be preoccupied this week 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.

The League is following two bills dealing with the state's water resources that were heard in House Committees this past week. The first bill, which passed a House Subcommittee, deals with what is known as "reclaimed water" which comes from highly treated sewage. Under Florida law, reclaimed water is treated as a public resource. It has become increasingly vital for watering lawns, replenishing water bodies and meeting industrial needs; tasks that would otherwise consume drinking water.

House bill 639 and its Senate counterpart would exempt reclaimed water as a state asset and transfer control of it to the cities and utility companies that produce it. The cities and utilities could then sell it to whomever they choose. Environmentalists argue the bill is a wholesale giveaway of a precious public asset that could supply more than one-fourth of the states water needs.

The second measure, which also passed a House Subcommittee, seeks to spell out where the "ordinary high water mark" is for state waters. The ordinary high water mark is the line between private property and what's considered the public's waterways including swamps, rivers and lakes. House Bill 1103 would allow the ordinary high water line to be marked lower, allowing more land to be designated as private. Sportsman and environmentalists are concerned the public could lose access to waterways if the bill passes.

The League continues to support Senate Bill 206 by Senator Joe Negron and its House counterpart HB 355 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. Its next scheduled hearing is Monday in the Senate Rules Committee. Please contact the Rules Committee members and ask them to vote "yes" on Senate Bill 206. <http://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/Show/RC/>

There is now both a Senate and a House sponsor of a bill that would repeal many of the bad provisions in last year's controversial elections law. Senate Minority Leader Nan Rich is sponsoring the bill in the Senate. SB 1636 would lengthen the time period for early voting to what it was before last year's law; increase the amount of time before 3rd party voter registration forms must be turned in; allow voters to change their registration at the polls if they have moved outside the county they are registered in. Representative Mark Pafford has a similar bill (HB 1189) in the House. Both of the bills sponsors are Democrats so its not likely the bills will pass.

One final piece of news this week of interest to League members is the appointment of Ken Detzner as Florida's new Secretary of State. Detzner replaces Kurt Browning who announced last week that he is resigning after the January 31st presidential primary election. Detzner is a lobbyist for the beer industry who briefly served as Secretary of State under former Governor Jeb Bush. The Department of State oversees state elections, cultural and historical programs, Florida corporations and libraries. Detzner will take charge at a time when a controversial new election law passed last year is being challenged by the League and others in court.

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