



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® O F F L O R I D A

Capitol Report 2012

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Overview

The third week of the legislative session is over and it ended with a bang as the House Reapportionment Committee voted out its maps for Congressional and legislative districts on a party-line vote with Democratic members voting “no.” The maps are expected to be considered by the full House next week.

Earlier in the week, Committee Chair Will Weatherford agreed to consider alternative maps that were submitted a week ago by the League of Women Voters of Florida, Common Cause Florida and the Hispanic advocacy organization the National Council of La Raza. The League and the other groups submitted a letter to the committee explaining how the maps were drawn including the fact that in our maps three House Districts are “nested” in each Senate District. The letter argued that in our maps districts are more compact and better comply with the Fair Districts amendments 5and 6.

At Friday’s meeting, the League and other members of the coalition were criticized by Chairman Weatherford and some committee members who characterized the maps and the letter as a “political and legal stunt.” They also said the coalition’s maps would violate the Voting Rights Act. The maps were voted down by a unanimous vote of the committee members.

Meanwhile, work on the state budget continued this week. Lawmakers are trying to write a new \$66 billion budget at the same time they are trying to find \$1 billion in new education funding and deal with a \$ 2 billion budget deficit. The House is going along with Governor Scott’s request to add the \$1 billion in new education funding, but it has stopped short of endorsing his controversial plan to cut \$1.9 billion in Medicaid payments to Florida hospitals. In the Senate, Senator Joe Negron, the Chair of the Senate Budget subcommittee that oversees health care spending, suggested looking for more targeted cuts in health care and social programs before turning to across-the-board rate cuts for health care providers.

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. 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 will be any better.

The Senate is fast-tracking legislation that would privatize much of the state's prison system. Senate Bill 2038 would privatize about 30 prisons, mostly in the southern part of the state. The proposal was put into law as part of last year's budget, but was later thrown out by a court. The judge said the privatization plan should not have been placed in the budget, but should have been the subject of a separate bill.

This week the privatization bill was heard in the Senate Rules Committee and the Senate Budget Committee. During the Rules Committee meeting Senators heard from dozens of prison guards concerned that the privatization plan would cost them their jobs and could jeopardize public safety. Senators who support the plan argue it will save a minimum of 7% which would amount to \$20 to \$40 million in savings.

The Senate Budget Committee ran out of time after only one opponent was able to speak against the bill. Corrections officers at that meeting complained that the bill is moving too fast and has not had enough public input. They urged Senators to slow the process down, but its next hearing will be on the floor of the full Senate. The League has been monitoring this bill, but has not taken a position for or against it. Currently the national League of Women Voters is developing a position on privatization issues.

The League is opposed to a companion bill however that would inject more secrecy and less accountability into efforts to privatize functions of state-run agencies. Senate Bill 2036 would do away with a current requirement that there be a cost-benefit analysis and the development of a "business case" before an agency is privatized to determine whether the move would reduce costs and provide more efficient services. The Senate Bill would delay production of a "business case" until after lawmakers have ordered an agency to outsource a service or a program – and the contract has been awarded. The League and others believe this bill is not in the best interest of open government.

The League was successful this week in working to amend an elections bill by Senator Diaz de la Portilla, Chair of the Ethics and Elections Subcommittee. Senator Diaz de la Portilla's bill, SB 1596, seeks to resolve a conflict in state election law involving the use of a voter's identification at the polls. Senator Diaz de la Portilla's bill removed the language in the law that conflicts with other law, but he also removed what the League believes is an essential voter protection against someone challenging a voter's right to vote based on the address on the identification card. The League worked with Senator Diaz de la Portilla's staff and others and drafted an amendment that keeps the protection against voter challenges in the law. It passed unanimously in the Ethics and Elections Subcommittee.

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 and 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 sponsors are Democrats so it's not likely the bills will pass. Meanwhile, two U.S. Senators held a hearing in Tampa on Friday focusing on what they say are problems with the 2011 election law. Senator Bill Nelson of Florida and Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, both Democrats, held the hearing to take public testimony on the new election law.

Three bills that would restrict access to legal abortions in the state passed a House Health subcommittee this week despite opposition from the League. The three measures include legislation that would outlaw abortions after 20 weeks (HB 839), require a 24 hour waiting period before having an abortion and place new regulations on clinics and doctors (HB 277) and require doctors to sign affidavits confirming that abortions are not being done because of the race or gender of the fetus (HB 1327). Critics claim the bills infringe on the ability of women and doctors to make medical decisions.

Two of the bills, HB 839 and HB 1327 have been scheduled for a hearing in the House Civil Justice Subcommittee next Tuesday. Please contact the members of the Subcommittee at <http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Committees/committeesdetail.aspx?SessionId=70&CommitteeId=2613> and ask them to vote "NO" on HB 839 and HB 1327!

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=jhigmrdb> 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 Marilynn 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