



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

Capitol Report 2012

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Filed by: Ben Wilcox, LWVF Governmental Consultant

Overview

With Senate passage last week of new district maps for Congress and the Legislature, the process of redistricting is quickly moving into its next phase. This week, the Congressional plan was signed into law by Governor Rick Scott. The Florida Democratic Party has already challenged the plan in court. The Fair Districts Coalition including the League of Women Voters of Florida, Common Cause Florida and the Latino advocacy organization La Raza is expected to file its own lawsuit very soon.

The Congressional proposal creates 27 districts, up from the current 25 seats. It has been reported that 16 of the proposed districts would have Republican majorities in voter registration in spite of the fact that there are 500,000 more registered Democrats statewide.

Also this week, state Attorney General Pam Bondi forwarded the legislative maps to the Florida Supreme Court for its review. The Court has said it will hear oral arguments on the plans on February 29. Democrats and the Fair Districts Coalition say they will oppose the plans arguing they do not comply with the anti gerrymandering standards in constitutional amendments 5 and 6.

With redistricting legal battles looming, a House Committee on Thursday passed a bill protecting lawmakers and their staff from having to testify if they get sued. The League and Democratic members of the committee criticized the late session-emerging bill from the House Judiciary Committee as an “outrageous” attempt to undermine the redistricting amendments in the constitution. The bill gives “absolute privilege” to current and former legislators and their staff in any civil action. Lawmakers would not be able to be compelled to testify or produce documents relating to any action or function performed in a legislative capacity. The House Rules Committee will take up the bill next week. Please contact the members of the Rules Committee and ask them to vote “No” on HB 7123 dealing with legislative immunity.

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Committees/committeesdetail.aspx?SessionId=70&CommitteeId=2596>

The Senate Budget Committee this week signed off on its version of a \$70.8 billion budget. The Senate plan is more than a billion dollars higher than the \$69.2 billion House plan

which passed the House two weeks ago, setting the stage for lengthy budget deliberations. The full Senate is expected to take up its budget next Thursday.

The most significant budget differences between the two chambers are found in funding for health care, transportation and state universities. The differences will likely be resolved when the House and Senate enter into conference committee negotiations. In other budget related news, the full Senate this week rejected a plan by the Senate leadership to privatize prisons in an 18-county region in South Florida. Republicans joined with Democrats in questioning claims by the Senate leadership that the state would save at least \$16.5 million by paying private companies 7% less than what it costs the state to operate the 26 facilities. The measure was defeated by a 21 to 19 vote. Meanwhile Governor Scott says he is looking into the possibility of using his authority to privatize the prisons anyway.

The League is supporting two elections bills (HB 1461 and SB 1596) that essentially accomplish the same result. The bills seek to resolve a conflict in state election law involving the use of a voter's identification at the polls. The League and others worked with the sponsors to successfully resolve a problem with the bills and they now contain identical language, preserving what the League believes is an essential voter protection against someone challenging a voter's right to vote based on the address on the voter's identification card. Both bills are now awaiting a hearing by the full House and Senate.

The Senate has approved a bill that the League supports which gives citizens a "reasonable" right to speak at meetings of local government and state executive branch bodies. Senators approved the bill (SB 206) by a unanimous vote. The bill was filed by Senator Joe Negron in response to two court rulings that found that while Florida's "sunshine law" requires officials meet in public, it does not give the public the right to be heard on issues being discussed at those meetings. The bill now goes to the House where a similar bill (HB 355) is working its way through the committee process.

The League continues to support an ethics bill by Senator Paula Dockery that would prohibit any legislator from voting on issues from which he or she would receive personal gain. Senate Bill 552 has 12 co-sponsors in the Senate, but the leadership assigned it to five committees, making it almost impossible for it to pass in a 60-day session. The bill was passed unanimously by the Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee and is currently in the Senate Judiciary Committee. Please contact Senate President Mike Haridopolos and ask him to allow the bill to be heard in the Judiciary Committee and move forward. <http://www.flsenate.gov/Senators/s26>

This is pretty much the last chance for me 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>
b for more details.

As you can see, this is turning out 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 (marilynwills@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