



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF FLORIDA

## Capitol Report 2012

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### Overview

With two weeks remaining, the Florida legislative session is officially in the home stretch and League members who were in Tallahassee this week for the Legislative Summit got to see the action first hand. On Wednesday afternoon, we had a very informative and interesting meeting in the state Cabinet room where we heard from legislators, a reporter and others involved in the legislative process.

We also had a great opening night session with an address by former legislator Alex Villalobos and our Gala in the Old Capitol featuring “Young Elected Officials” from all over Florida. In between those exciting events, League members met with their legislators to discuss pending issues and attended legislative committee meetings. Our heartfelt thanks go out to all League members who attended and helped make the League’s voice heard in Tallahassee.

Leaders in the legislature this week abruptly dropped plans to try and pass a bill to give lawmakers and their staff sweeping immunity or “absolute privilege” from having to testify or produce documents in any civil case that has to do with the legislative process. The legislation emerged in a House committee last week after the League and others filed lawsuits challenging the redistricting maps drawn by the legislature. The bill was seen as an effort by some lawmakers to avoid answering questions about their intent when drawing the district lines. The new anti-gerrymandering constitutional amendments 5 and 6 specifically prohibit drawing districts with the “intent” to favor incumbents or political parties.

Legislative leaders announced they were dropping the legislation after criticism by Democratic members of the legislature, the League and several newspaper editorials. Oral arguments on the legislative redistricting maps have been scheduled for next Wednesday, February 29<sup>th</sup>, in the Florida Supreme Court. Democrats and the Fair Districts Coalition will oppose the plans arguing they do not comply with the anti-gerrymandering standards in constitutional amendments 5 and 6.

With redistricting behind them for now, legislators are focusing on passage of a budget. On Thursday, The Senate passed its version of a \$70.7 billion budget. The Senate plan is \$1.5 billion higher than the \$69.2 billion House plan which was passed by the House three

weeks ago, setting the stage for lengthy budget deliberations. 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.

Much of the budget debate in the Senate revolved around state university funding. Senate Budget Chief J.D. Alexander has been pushing a plan to make the University of South Florida's Polytechnic campus in his home Polk County an independent institution and the state's 12<sup>th</sup> public university. USF officials have resisted Alexander's efforts and earlier this month the University was facing a \$78.8 million funding cut, sparking protests from USF students complaining the cuts were payback from Alexander. On the Senate floor, Senator Alexander acquiesced to some amendments restoring some of USF's funding, but he later pushed through a measure (SB1994) that would formally create Florida Polytechnic as the state's 12<sup>th</sup> university. The legislation was approved after an intense debate, with critics saying taxpayers could not afford a 12<sup>th</sup> university and it wasn't needed.

While the battle over the budget was happening in the open on the floor of the Senate, another battle over who would be the future Senate leaders was going on behind the scenes. Due to term limits, leadership in the legislature is usually decided years in advance of the actual term of office. In this case, the intrigue involved who would lead the Senate in 2014 and 2016. Senator Don Gaetz has already been selected to succeed current Senate President Mike Haridopolos in 2012.

Orlando Senator Andy Gardiner has been battling Senator Jack Latvala from Clearwater for the presidency in 2014, but this week some of Gardiner's supporters, Senators John Thrasher and Joe Negron, withdrew their support. They tried to coax Gardiner's other pledges to support them for the presidency in 2014 and 2016. Stung by the betrayals, Gardiner began negotiating with Senator Latvala, his former opponent, to patch together a coalition. On Thursday, he announced he had succeeded. As part of the deal that brought together enough Republican votes, Gardiner will be president in 2014 and Latvala will lead the chamber in 2016. It's too early to tell if the infighting is over or whether the behind-the-scenes intrigue will continue.

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 House State Affairs Committee this week 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. The bill (HB 355) was filed by Representative Marty Kiar and 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 full House. The Senate Bill (SB 206) has been passed by the Senate and is currently in House messages.

The League is concerned about two bad bills that seem to be gathering momentum in the final weeks of the session. The bills deal with women's reproductive rights and both the Senate and the House versions were passed in committees this week. Senate Bill (SB 290), passed by the Senate Health Regulation Committee, is an omnibus anti-abortion measure that includes a number of provisions designed to make it harder for women to obtain legal abortions in the state. Among other things, the bill would impose a 24-hour waiting period before a woman can have an abortion and restrict ownership of abortion clinics to doctors who specialized in abortion procedures during their residency. The bill is scheduled to be heard next in the Senate Criminal Justice Committee and the League is urging its members to contact the committee members and ask them to vote "NO" on SB290.

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The House bill (HB 277) is even worse than the Senate bill. The House Health and Human Services Committee added an additional controversial provision this week requiring women be told that fetuses can experience "fetal pain" during an abortion after 20 weeks in the womb. Scientists are divided on whether this is true. The House bill will be heard next by the full House. Please contact your representative and tell them to vote "NO" on HB 277. <http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/representatives.aspx>

A final bill that the League is watching involves the state's water resources. Last year, despite opposition from environmental groups, Governor Rick Scott signed a bill that cut state water management district property taxes by \$210 million. Senate Bill 1986 would restore the budget cuts, but it also gives the legislature the power to approve water management district budgets and tax rates. Environmental groups and the League support restoring the budget cuts, but believe the other parts of the bill represent an attempt by the legislature to take control of the water management district's budgets. The bill was passed by the Senate this week and is now in House messages. Please contact your representative and tell them to vote "NO" on Senate Bill 1986.

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

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 (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](http://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](http://www.leg.state.fl.us). For more information about the League's advocacy, check out [www.TheFloridaVoter.org](http://www.TheFloridaVoter.org)