



LEGISLATIVE ACTION KIT

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League of Women Voters of Suffolk County

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INTRODUCTION

Lobbying legislators on every level of government is an important and effective way for League members and legislators to exchange ideas and discuss the League's current legislative agenda.

The Legislative Committee of the LWV of Suffolk County (LWVSC) has compiled this kit to provide guidelines for League members to use when meeting with legislators. It includes an executive summary of each issue, as well as state and national League positions. As lobbyists representing the League, it is necessary to be familiar with national, state and county positions on these specific issues.

When speaking for the League, members may do so in agreement with these positions, and must not support any policy where no position has been taken. It is understood that advocacy efforts on a local issue, decided by a local League, must not conflict with these positions.

ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION

Executive Summary

For many years, LWVNYS has advocated for Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI), an advocacy that has become especially important because of the mandate that Suffolk County has received from the NYS Commission on Correction to build a new jail to increase available jail space and replace deteriorating facilities.

Approximately 80% of offenders have substance abuse problems. ATI programs are set up to deal with core issues such as mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse and criminal thinking to provide treatment and to enable many offenders to build constructive lives. ATI programs reduce the recidivism rate from 75% to below 20%. The current cost of a jail cell is over \$200 per day. It is therefore logical that Alternatives to Incarceration should receive significantly increased funding and support from both New York State and Suffolk County Legislatures. The increased funding for ATI would result in a net decrease in cost for the criminal justice system.

Some ATI programs now in existence are: the bail expeditor program, Red Cross community service programs, pre-trial supervised release, liaison with treatment communities (an ATI for those individuals charged with crimes related to a substance abuse problem), the day reporting center for substance abuse offenders, and the Sheriff's DWI Facility. For a more complete list, see: www.co.suffolk.ny.us/webtemp3.cfm?dept=47&ID=2472

Mental Illness / Mental Health Courts

Research indicates that about 16 percent of the national prison and jail population suffers from some form of mental illness. Many of these people, by the time they become involved with the judicial system, have already fallen through the safety net provided by families, hospitals and community-based treatment centers. When they reach the courts, judges often lack the necessary tools either for assessment or for adequate treatment options. They often decide, especially because of concerns for public safety, to incarcerate mentally ill defendants. For some, this sentence is appropriate, but for many others it is highly destructive and their conditions deteriorate. They go without necessary treatment and services and often become repeatedly incarcerated, serving neither them nor the community. In order to more adequately address this growing problem, Mental Health Courts are being established to link defendants to long-term treatment as an Alternative to Incarceration. These problem-solving courts seek to move beyond standard case procedures to address the underlying problems that bring people to court, the challenge being to change the future behavior of defendants. Suffolk County saw the introduction of its first Mental Health Court in February 2006.

Recommendations

1. Advocate for expansion of existing ATI programs and development of additional programs set up to deal with core issues such as mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse and criminal thinking.
2. Support increased funding on both the state and county level for ATI programs.
3. Follow agendas of the Public Safety Committee.

LWV Position

LWVNYS Impact on Issues 2003-2005, pp.76, 78

Recognizing the enormous costs of state prisons and local jails, and the distressingly high rates of recidivism, the League of Women Voters of New York State, at its convention in 1991, adopted a study of Alternatives to Incarceration.

In the criminal justice system there is a need for a broad range of punishments less restrictive than incarceration. Prisons and jails must be viewed as a scarce and expensive resource to be utilized only when necessary. The current system wastes time, money, and human resources. The LWVNYS strongly supports the use of ATI for nonviolent offenders. There is a need for earlier, more effective intervention and, if applicable, treatment. Sanctions should be more innovative, constructive and less restrictive.

The LWVNYS strongly supports greater discretion in the use of alternatives at all stages of the criminal justice process; i.e., pre-trial, sentencing, and re-entry.

LWVUS Impact on Issues 2004-2006 contains no position in regard to Alternatives to Incarceration.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Executive Summary

LWVUS: Impact on Issues 2004-2006, p. 17

The League has long supported campaign finance reform, believing that methods of financing political campaigns should ensure the public's right to know, combat corruption and undue influence, enable candidates to compete more equitably for public office and allow maximum citizen participation in the political process.

History

The Suffolk County Campaign Finance Board was authorized in 1998 when a public referendum, with a two-thirds vote by County voters, approved a program of partial public funding of County election campaigns and public disclosure of campaign finances. A five-member board, to serve without compensation for five-year terms (staggered), was to implement the program by establishing a Campaign Finance Fund available to participating candidates, formulating and administering rules and conditions for participation, and creating a publicly accessible computer database of County candidate financial reports.

While rules on eligibility, funding and expenditure limits were established initially to be applied first in County elections in 2002, and some funds were collected by the Board, no candidate ever received any money.

At the start of 2005, there were only three members left on the Board and the budget had been eliminated by the Legislature in November 2004, thus making the agency non-functional. The remaining Board members resigned, saying they were paralyzed without funds or staff. Thus the Campaign Finance Board is at a standstill and non-functional. However, the Campaign Finance Electronic Filing System is now maintained by the Board of Elections - www.co.suffolk.ny.us/boe/cf/

Meanwhile, at the State level, there is a law effective January 1, 2006, mandating financial disclosure, electronically, of any person running for public office in New York State. (Contributions under \$100 do not have to be identified.) The State Assembly passed a bill in 2005 to publicly finance campaigns. The State Senate, though, failed to act on their bill.

Recommendation

Even though there is no longer a functioning Campaign Finance Board in Suffolk County, the LWVSC will continue to support reform based on the positions of the LWVUS. The State League's position of 1991 has been the basis for extensive lobbying at each session of the State Legislature since that time.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

In keeping with our support for equality of opportunity for access to housing, the League supports efforts by Suffolk County government to work with town and villages to create a diversity of affordable housing opportunities.

Recommended actions:

- transfer of land for affordable and accessible housing,
- funding for down payment assistance and rent subsidies,
- funding to assist nonprofit organizations to build and rehabilitate housing for low income purchasers and renters,
- incentives to encourage local governments to take affirmative action to accept their share of the responsibility for providing housing and vacant land for low and moderate income families.

LWVUS Impact on Issues 2004-2006, p. 61

The LWVUS believes that the federal government shares with other levels of government the responsibility to provide equality of opportunity for education, employment and housing for all persons in the United States regardless of their race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation or disability.

LWVSC Affordable Housing 2002

The League of Women Voters of Suffolk County believes there should be a diversity of housing opportunities for low and middle income people, for homeownership and rentals, in proximity to places of employment, transportation, recreation and commercial development. The League supports collaborative community based planning for long-term land use and coordination of local government decisions on infrastructure, taxes, economic development incentives, transportation and facilities location.

- In order to broaden access to the job market and community facilities for families of all economic circumstances, the League supports efforts to facilitate a variety of transportation choices to reduce automobile dependency, supports mixed use development of main streets, historic districts, downtowns, brownfields, and supports location of land development in areas where infrastructure and public services are adequate.
- The League encourages the creation of flexible codes and ordinances to allow for mixed housing types, sizes and price ranges.
- The League supports county initiatives to promote affordably priced homes through the transfer of properties from the county inventory of tax defaults and through purchase of properties.

Smart Growth / Containing Sprawl

The League supports measures to conserve natural resources and contain sprawl.

Recommended actions:

- participation in regional land use planning,
- action to protect agricultural land, open space, watersheds and other sensitive areas,
- action to enhance neighborhoods through mixed-use development of main streets, historic districts, downtowns, and brownfields in order to accommodate an appropriate proportion of necessary development which would otherwise be located on undeveloped land
- planning to locate affordable housing in proximity to places of employment, transportation, recreation, and commercial development.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Executive Summary

The League has strong positions advocating measures to protect and manage natural resources. The LWV of Suffolk County has chosen to concentrate on the need for measures to protect our drinking water. In particular, we focus on pesticide use, land use, and other factors affecting the quality of the Long Island watershed and aquifers.

Recommendations:

- Encourage individual responsibility on residential, commercial and agricultural levels in the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemical pollutants in our air, land, and water
- On occasion proposals may be initiated and controlled by higher levels of governmental or non-governmental organizations that are contrary to League positions and have a direct effect on Suffolk County. We educate our local citizens to advocate or oppose these issues.
- Work on a national level to reduce air pollution, water pollution in our interstate waterways

LWVUS Impact of Issues 2004-2006, p.40

The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that natural resources should be managed as interrelated parts of life-supporting ecosystems. Resources should be conserved and protected to assure their future availability. Pollution of these resources should be controlled in order to preserve the physical, chemical and biological diversity of ecosystems and to protect public health.

LWVNYS Impact on Issues 2003-2005, p.93

The League supports:

- a regional watershed approach requiring regulations that cross municipal boundaries;
- requiring communities to keep their water and sewage infrastructure in good working condition;
- limiting the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers; and
- improving coordination between the various agencies charged to protect our drinking water supplies.

ELECTION PROCESS REFORM

LEAGUE POSITIONS and RELATED LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEES

Affordable Housing/Smart Growth

Labor, Workforce & Affordable Housing

Wednesday 2 PM; Legislator Browning, Chair 852-1300

Alternatives to Incarceration

Public Safety & Public Information

Tuesday 11:30 AM; Legislator Eddington, Chair 854-1400

Campaign Finance Reform

Ways & Means

Thursday 9:30 AM; Legislator D'Amaro, Chair 854-1900

Election Process Reform

Ways & Means

Thursday 9:30 AM; Legislator D'Amaro, Chair 854-1900

Environment (Water, Pesticides, Energy)

Environment, Planning & Agriculture

Thursday 2 PM; Legislator Vilorio-Fisher, Chair 854-1500

Economic Development, Higher Education & Energy

Wednesday 9:30 AM; Legislator Horsley, Chair 854-1100

Please Note: by calling the office of the Committee Chair and requesting to be listed as an "Interested Party", your e-mail will be added to the e-mail addresses that receive that Committee's agendas several days before meetings. In this way, it is possible to stay current with proposed legislation for that specific League position.

SUFFOLK COUNTY 2006 OPERATING BUDGET

Budget Overview

The total Suffolk County 2006 operating budget is \$2.7 billion, which represents \$1,927 for each adult and child in the County.

Suffolk County prepares three budgets each year: the operating budget, the capital program budget and the budget for the Suffolk County Community College. The capital budget must be adopted by the Legislature by June 30 for approval by the County Executive. The 2006 capital budget is \$241 million. The Community College budget is approved prior to the start of the academic year on September 1. The Community College budget is \$145 million.

The following paragraphs address only the 2006 operating budget. The fiscal year for the operating budget starts January 1.

The information included here can only be considered an overview of a quite complex subject.

Operating Budget Timeline

- The County Executive holds two hearings on his proposed budget in August.
- The County Executive submits his proposed budget to the Legislature the third Friday in September.
- The Legislature holds two hearings, completed by October 31.
- By November 10, the Legislature must act to amend the proposed budget, and submit it to the County Executive.
- The County Executive may veto the whole budget, or individual line items, before November 21, or the budget is adopted as submitted.

Points to Keep in Mind

Revenue comes from property taxes, sales tax, state aid, federal aid, and other sources.

The revenue stream included in the budget is only an estimate of the amounts that can be anticipated. If retail sales fall, the yield from the 8.75% sales tax will not be as great as anticipated. Similarly, if homeowners and business owners do not promptly pay their property tax, there is a shortfall. The county borrows money in anticipation of receiving this revenue; therefore, debt service is required because of this borrowing. Pie chart A provides a general view of the revenue anticipated in 2006.

Expenditures are for personnel, debt service, and a wide variety of services, such as police, education and economic assistance. Some expenditures are mandated by the state and federal government, which restricts the freedom of the county to apportion expenditures.

The proposed 2006 expenditures are shown in the pie chart B. The largest functions are economic assistance and public safety.. About one third of the \$2.7 billion budget is "mandated" by various state and federal programs, such as Medicaid. The remainder is "discretionary."

Townships - The budgets of the 10 towns in the county are separate from the county budget.

Comparison -

- The full valuation of property in the county is \$250 billion.
- The county budget is about as large as the annual expenditures of two states – South Dakota and Wyoming.
- The county population --1.4 million – is larger than that of 12 states.

Expenditure Details

PUBLIC SAFETY

Police, Sheriff, District Attorney, Probation, jail staff (A portion is mandated.), Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services

TRANSPORTATION

Highway and fleet maintenance, bus program, and LIRR payments (A portion is mandated.)

ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE

Medicaid and welfare (All is mandated, except staff costs.)

CULTURE AND RECREATION

Parks

EDUCATION

Handicapped children (A portion is mandated.) and Community College

HOME AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Sewer district operation and maintenance, including Southwest Sewer District

DEBT SERVICE

(All is mandated.)

Chart A – 2006 Suffolk County Revenues

All revenues are in millions

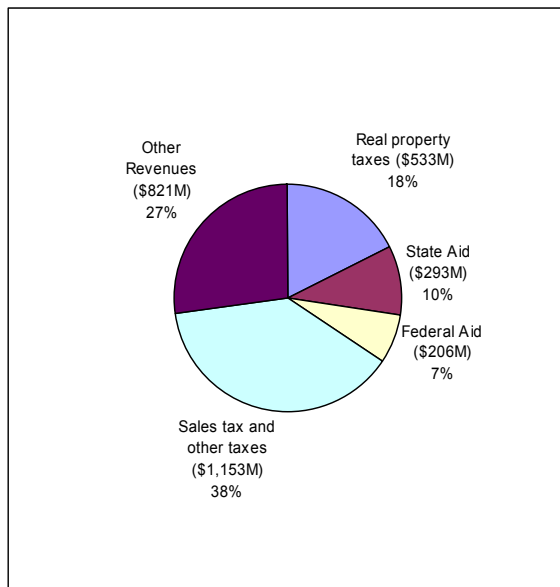
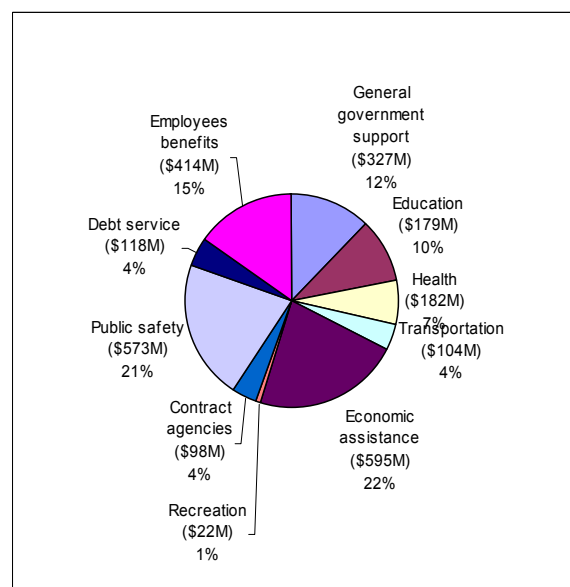


Chart B – 2006 Suffolk County Expenditures

All expenditures are in millions



PUBLIC POLICY POSITIONS

League of Women Voters of the United States

REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

Promote an open governmental system that is representative, accountable and responsive.

Voting Rights

Citizen's Right to Vote. Protect the right of all citizens to vote; encourage all citizens to vote.

DC Self-Government and Full Voting Representation.

Secure for the citizens of the District of Columbia the rights of self-government and full voting representation in both houses of Congress.

Election Process

Apportionment. Support apportionment of congressional districts and elected legislative bodies at all levels of government based substantially on population.

Campaign Finance. Improve methods of financing political campaigns in order to ensure the public's right to know, combat corruption and undue influence, enable candidates to compete more equitably for public office and promote citizen participation in the political process.

Selection of the President. Promote the election of the President and Vice-President by direct-popular vote and work to abolish the Electoral College. Support uniform national voting qualifications and procedures for presidential elections. Support efforts to provide voters with sufficient information about candidates.

Citizen Rights

Citizen's Right to Know/Citizen Participation. Protect the citizen's right to know and facilitate citizen participation in government decision making.

Individual Liberties. Oppose major threats to basic constitutional rights.

Public Policy on Reproductive Choices. Protect the constitutional right of privacy of the individual to make reproductive choices.

Congress and the Presidency

Congress. Support responsive legislative processes characterized by accountability, representativeness, decision-making capability and effective performance.

The Presidency. Promote a dynamic balance of power between the executive and legislative branches within the framework set by the Constitution.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Promote peace in an interdependent world by working cooperatively with other nations and strengthening international organizations.

United Nations

Support a strong, effective United Nations to promote international peace and security and to address the social, economic and humanitarian needs of all people.

Trade

Support U.S. trade policies that reduce trade barriers expand international trade and advance the achievement of humanitarian, environmental and social goals.

U.S. Relations with Developing Countries

Promote U.S. policies that meet long-term social and economic needs of developing countries.

Arms Control

Reduce the risk of war through support of arms control measures.

Military Policy and Defense Spending

Work to limit reliance on military force. Examine defense spending in the context of total national needs.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Promote an environment beneficial to life through the protection and wise management of natural resources in the public interest.

Natural Resources

Promote the management of natural resources as interrelated parts of life-supporting ecosystems.

Resource Management

Promote resource conservation, stewardship and long-range planning, with the responsibility for managing natural resources shared by all levels of government.

Environmental Protection and Pollution Control

Preserve the physical, chemical and biological integrity of the ecosystem, with maximum protection of public health and the environment.

Air Quality. Promote measures to reduce pollution from mobile and stationary sources.

Energy. Support environmentally sound policies that reduce energy growth rates, emphasize energy conservation and encourage the use of renewable resources.

Land Use. Promote policies that manage land as a finite resource and that incorporate principles of stewardship.

Water Resources. Support measures to reduce pollution in order to protect surface water, groundwater and drinking water.

Waste Management. Promote policies to reduce the generation and promote the reuse and recycling of solid and hazardous wastes.

Nuclear Issues. Promote the maximum protection of public health and safety and the environment.

Public Participation

Promote public understanding and participation in decision making as essential elements of responsible and responsive management of our natural resources.

Agriculture Policy

Promote adequate supplies of food and fiber at reasonable prices to consumers and support economically viable farms, environmentally sound farm practices and increased reliance on the free market.

SOCIAL POLICY

Secure equal rights and equal opportunity for all. Promote social and economic justice and the health and safety of all Americans.

Equality of Opportunity

Equal Rights. Support ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and efforts to bring laws into compliance with the goals of the ERA.

Education, Employment and Housing. Support equal access to education, employment and housing.

Fiscal Policy

Tax Policy. Support adequate and flexible funding of federal government programs through an equitable tax system that is progressive overall and that relies primarily on a broad-based income tax.

Federal Deficit. Promote responsible deficit policies.

Funding of Entitlements. Support a federal role in providing mandatory, universal, old-age, survivors, disability and health insurance.

Health Care

Promote a health care system for the United States that provides access to a basic level of quality care for all U.S. residents and controls health care costs.

Meeting Basic Human Needs

Support programs and policies to prevent or reduce poverty and to promote self-sufficiency for individuals and families.

Income Assistance. Support income assistance programs, based on need, that provide decent, adequate standards for food, clothing and shelter.

Support Services. Provide for essential support services.

Housing Supply. Support policies to provide a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.

Child Care

Support programs and policies to expand the supply of affordable, quality child care for all who need it.

Early Intervention for Children at Risk

Support policies and programs that promote the wellbeing, development and safety of all children.

Violence Prevention

Support violence prevention programs in communities.

Gun Control

Protect the health and safety of citizens through limiting the accessibility and regulating the ownership of handguns and semi-automatic weapons. Support regulation of firearms for consumer safety.

Urban Policy

Promote the economic health of cities and improve the quality of urban life.

Whatever the issue, the League believes that efficient and economical government requires competent personnel, the clear assignment of responsibilities, adequate financing, coordination among levels of government, effective enforcement and well defined channels for citizen input and review.

LWVNYS POSITIONS IN BRIEF

2003-2005

ELECTION LAW

*Support of measures to protect, extend and encourage the use of the franchise; open the political system by enacting a public campaign financing law for statewide offices; establish legal, ethical campaign guidelines; monitor campaign practices; simplify rules for ballot access. And restore integrity to the election process – specifically support uniformity in election laws and procedures and in their implementation and enforcement; promote measures that ensure the integrity of all ballots; and support adequate funding for these procedures and for training of all involved election personnel.**

Opposition to term limits for members of the NYS Legislature.

Opposition to term limits for NYS statewide elected officials.

GOVERNMENT

Support of standards to ensure equitable representation in the State Legislature and the Congress.

Support of improved measures to provide representation for legislative districts in case of a vacancy.

Support of responsive and responsible legislative processes which increase the role of the individual member and the committee system.

Support of effective lobbying and ethics regulation.

Support of procedural reforms in the constitutional convention process to promote openness and nonpartisanship.

HEALTH CARE

Support of measures to assure a basic level of quality physical and mental health care for all state residents including regulatory incentives to encourage development of cost-effective alternative methods of delivery; funding for health promotion and disease prevention programs; provisions for effective citizen participation in health policy decisions.

Support of measures that enable individuals to assume responsibility for their own health and to participate in decisions including termination of extraordinary life-extending procedures.

Support for uniform eligibility and coverage of basic health care costs through public financing.

JUDICIAL

Support of a unified state court system with improved provisions for judicial selection.

Support of statewide guidelines for law enforcement at all levels to prevent racial and economic profiling.

Support of measures to improve pretrial procedures in the criminal courts.

Support of measures to promote a fair and efficient jury system.

Support of alternatives to incarceration.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Support for measures to achieve watershed protection including limiting pesticide uses and applying Best Management Practices.

Support for a state-established, intergovernmental system for land resource management.

Support for a proactive role for New York State in regional land use planning, containing urban sprawl and protecting sensitive areas

Support of reconditioning of the New York State Erie/Barge Canal System and its development for recreational uses.

SOCIAL POLICY

Support measures to meet the needs for low-income housing through use of state funds and incentives to localities

STATE FINANCES

Support reforms for greater equity in education financing for both pupils and the taxpayers.

Oppose in principle the use of public funds to support non-public schools, kindergarten-twelfth grade.

Support of a uniform equitable assessment and property tax system.

Support of measures to provide for openness and accountability in the operation of the New York State public authority system.

Support of a timely and responsive state budget.

Support the funding of public higher education and the existing formula for financing the community system, 1/3 tuition, 1/3 state aid, and 1/3 county support.

WOMENS ISSUES/SOCIAL POLICY

Support of measures which hold marriage to be an economic partnership with a presumption of equality between the spouses.

Opposition to measures that contain a presumption of joint custody of the children.

Support for equity in employment laws and practices and equal pay for jobs of comparable worth.

Support of measures to reduce the incidence and effects of domestic violence.

Support for measures to meet the needs for affordable and accessible housing through use of state funds and incentives to localities.

* These state positions are based on LWVUS principles and public policy positions. State actions on other items not covered under a state position can also be taken under LWVUS positions. Reproductive choices (Government position) and welfare reform (Meeting Basic Human Needs position) are two examples.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Marilyn Brown, Co-President, Huntington League; County Board

Arlene Forward, Co-President, Huntington League; County Board

Adam Gaus, Smithtown League; County Board, Webmaster

Katherine Hoak, Chair; Huntington League; County Board, Co-President

Sondra Irvine President, Smithtown League; County Board

Nancy Marr, President, Brookhaven League; County Board

Mary McLaughlin, Huntington League

Joyce Rosenthal, Smithtown League; County Board, Voter Services

Lisa Scott, Smithtown League; County Board, Co-President