

THE CHAMPLAIN VALLEY VOTER

Newsletter of the League of Women Voters of the Champlain Valley

March 2007

CVLWV Board, 2006 - 2007

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Calendar of Events

We sponsor meetings and events for the public and League members.

Champlain Valley LWV Monthly Meetings

We alternate between noon and evening meetings on the second Wednesday of each month, September through May.

Legislative Day

An opportunity to greet other LWV members, chat with your legislators, attend committee meetings, and more! Wednesday, Feb. 7, 9 am - 1 pm, Vermont State House, Montpelier

March 14, Noon - 1 pm

Openness in Government: Looking for Sunshine

Pickering Room at Fletcher Free Library, 235 College Street, Burlington

In honor of Sunshine Week, Mike Donoghue, President of the Vermont Coalition for Open Government, will talk about accountability and transparency in government. Mike is a Burlington Free Press staff writer and was one of three journalists inducted in 2003 into "Heroes of the 50 States: The State Open Government Hall of Fame," a joint venture between the Society of Professional Journalists and the National Freedom of Information Coalition. Please come to learn more about this issue and to ask your questions!

BRING YOUR TOWN MEETING SUMMARIES TO OUR MARCH 14 MEETING!

We're eager to hear your highlights. Everyone is invited to share a 2-minute summary of their individual Town Meeting experience at our March 14 member meeting on Openness in Government.

April 11, 7 pm

Lake Champlain: Challenges and Opportunities

Speeder & Earl's Coffee 412 Pine St. Burlington

In anticipation of summer, the Champlain Valley League of Women Voters is pleased to present a talk on one of Vermont's most precious assets, Lake Champlain. Our speaker, Bill Howland, Program Manager, Lake Champlain Basin Program will discuss the state of the lake's water quality, fisheries, wetlands and wildlife, as well as how the lake serves as a recreational and cultural resource.

May 9 Cocktails at 5:30. Dinner at 6 pm.

Annual Meeting and Pot-Luck Dinner

Mabel Buttolph's home 20 Peterson Terrace So. Burlington

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT - Marge Gaskins

What an interesting first year of the biennium this is becoming. The legislators are tackling some very large issues that may, or may not have some impact on the country and citizens in Vermont. And it's politics as usual with the partisan gap between the Republican governor and Democrat legislature. Are we, voters of Vermont, caught in the middle and doomed to another year of no solutions to high property taxes, high cost health care and housing, and wrangling over the lack of good jobs to entice our bright, well-educated kids to live in Vermont?

Are we and the Vermont "powers that be" overlooking some good laws that we may need to change or write that will truly make a difference in our lives and our worth? Let me give you a couple of our issues and the value of them that I see.

For more than 30 years the LWVVT has urged a Constitutional revision to pass a 4-year term for our Governor and Lt. Governor. The cost of that campaign and election is ballooning, and the administration term is so limited that the best, the brightest and most affordable people and solutions to our needs can't be implemented. If it makes it to the floor for discussion, it is guaranteed set off a firestorm and maybe end up with no action without including legislators, because it would create inequity between them and the Governor.

Funding our schools is a perennial problem that seems to work for a little while with each new formula. Then property taxes continue to grow, and our population ages and loses interest in using their life savings to pay for a lot of schools with declining enrollment and they want a more affordable solution. Is the only answer voting down some budgets?

We are still stuck in neutral for affordable, renewable energy. Some of the answers, including wind power (but not where aesthetics might be affected), hydro facilities in Canada (could be costly), wood, coal or nuclear are dirty or scary, as well as expensive. And oil and gas don't come from Vermont. It's easy to sit back and say what we don't like and can't afford, but how about a suggestion that might work?

Election proposals are near and dear to me. We need to encourage people to ask questions and get out to vote. Election day registration, a really workable statewide checklist every polling place can access, and civic education that will excite younger voters is possible, but we need the support of the legislature and the administration. Are party politics and power struggles more important?

Plug in here your own issues, and remember them when you talk to your representative.

ARE YOU A NOTARY?

If so, please let us know by replying to this e-mail (imwren@aol.com) or phoning 879-0011. When we have an opportunity to register voters, we may let you know.

VT HEALTH CARE REFORM NEWS

Jean Hopkins suggests visiting <http://hcr.vermont.gov> for updates on health care reform in Vermont.

FRONT PORCH FORUM

Need to better connect with people in your neighborhood? Consider using Front Porch Forum. It works on many levels: economic, social, educational, political, and practical, in countless ways.

Front Porch Forum is a place to share neighborhood news, have discussions, work on neighborhood improvement projects, and post items for sale, to borrow, lost and found, etc. All of these actions add up to a more healthy and vibrant community.

Your neighborhood's forum is only open to the people who live there. It's free and requires no work from you. Simply join (<http://frontporchforum.com/join/>) and receive occasional email newsletters written by your neighbors. Contribute messages as you like. It's all about helping you connect. To find out more, take their tour at: <http://frontporchforum.com/tour/>.

2007 MEMBERSHIP LIST!

If you have joined the League of Women Voters by paying dues this year, you may contact imwren@aol.com to request a membership list to be sent to you via e-mail.

FUNDING OUR SCHOOLS - Amy Bond

How can we compile all of the parts of school funding to improve the fairness to the local residential property tax payer?

In response to the supreme court ruling that the quality of education should not be dependent on where in Vermont a student happens to live, Act 60 went into effect in 1997. Its framers recognized that additional problems would need to be addressed soon. What are some of the

many ways the problems can be addressed? Is a property tax better than an income tax? What is the best way to compare one district to another for purposes of distributing state aid. What is the best way to determine residential property value? How should cost per student be defined? It seems we can ask more questions than we can answer.

Local residential income tax:

- It will not tax out of state property owners, requiring more to be raised by Vermonters.
- The tax rate that will be needed is indeterminate.
- Low income voters may not be affected, so will approve, while higher income voters would be more inclined to reject a proposed budget.
- An income tax doesn't work well on non-residential property.

Local residential property tax:

- The tax rate can be closely estimated before the budget vote.
- With income sensitivity proportional to the property tax rate, low income people will pay a reduced tax rate while higher income people may pay less than they would with an income tax.
- Property tax depends on a fair system of property valuation both within each town as well as compared with other towns. The CLA (common level of appraisal) provides equity among towns but is quite unfair where we have inconsistency within a town. Use of fair market value pleases our sense of propriety but seems to cause more problems than we are able to cope with especially in times of rapidly changing market value. Can we initiate a system that uses physical attributes such as footprint, quality, of building materials, number of rooms, location, acreage, etc., creating a rating to each property to which a tax rate can be applied?
- Non-residential property owners should pay school taxes only to the state education fund, because service to local schools does not directly affect them.
- If at all possible the state tax on residential property should be eliminated. Taxing residential property only at the local level is fairer and easier for taxpayers to understand, and because it would include all school district voters it would provide the best form of cost control.

Cost per student: Vermont gives aid to each school district such that the tax rate is the same for every district which has the same cost per student, with the tax rate increasing as the cost per student increases. With this goal, the way we define cost per student is critical. Ideally it should include only those costs which are in the control of the local district. We would eliminate, for example, those costs required by the state constitution, by the federal government, and by state administrative regulations. These items would be separately funded to each school district from federal funds and from taxes paid into the Vermont education fund. Some of these items would be, capital construction and debt service, transportation, special education, school lunches, "no child left behind", etc. It should be noted that weighting of students by grade level is faulty and should be eliminated. All school districts have pre K-12 students making weighting unnecessary.

If we can resolve problems with residential property values and cost per student, the local tax rate will follow. Until we do, a block grant from funds other than residential property taxes will absorb some of the burden by reducing the amount to be raised by local taxes. A block grant should be no higher than 90% to 95% of the median state cost per student.

HAVE QUESTIONS? Send them to our editor Irene Wrenner, 15 Thrush Lane, Essex Junction 05452 or imwren@aol.com.

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The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

Membership in the League is open to men and women citizens of all ages. With more than 86 years of experience and 850 local and state affiliates, the League is one of America's most trusted grassroots organizations.