



Mid-Hudson Region Commentator

April, 2006

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CALENDAR

APR.

- 1 9:00 to 3:00 Health Care Mtg., Dutchess County CC
- 4 7:15 to 9:15 Board meeting at Shirley Kobran's
- 5 7:00 to 9:00 Membership Committee at Shirley Kobran's
- 13 7:00 Legislature votes on new voting machines.
- 20 1:30 to 3:00 Book Repair at Askue's

MAY

- 2 7:15 to 9:15 Board meeting at Jacki Moriarty's
- 6 8:30 to 4:00 Women's Health Fair, Tech City Kingston
- 6 2:00 to 4:00 Followup health care meeting, Poughkeepsie
- 23 7:00 to 9:00 Consensus meeting for state study on financing education

JUN.

- 3 "Run for Women" Albany
- 6 7:15 to 9:15 Board meeting, place to be determined
- 10-13 National LWV convention, Minneapolis
- 20 6:00-to 9:00 Annual meeting pot luck,

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The Prez Sez..

Hi everyone! I hope you are enjoying the spring weather. Believe it or not we are already planning our annual meeting in June. It will be upon us before we know it. I hope you will join us and feel free to bring a friend. I also would like to invite you to a board meeting. Did you ever wonder what we do at board meetings? Well here is your opportunity to find out. If you are interested in attending a board meeting as my guest please call me at 339-0509. Please check out the calendar for upcoming events like the women's health fair and other meetings.

Chris

Ulster County Charter Meeting

'Twas a brisk Saturday morning when a group of Leaguers, interested citizens, and 7 members of the Ulster County Charter Commission congregated at Kingston City Hall to hear a presentation by Dr. Gerald Benjamin, the Commission Chair and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, SUNY, New Paltz. The facilitator was Barbara Van Itallie, a League member from Dutchess County.

The 102 page charter is available for viewing (or downloading) on the website www.co.ulstercounty.ny.us.

Dr. Benjamin gave a bit of historical background. In the 18th and 19th centuries counties were created as "branch offices" of the state in rural areas. Originally governed by appointed officials they in time transitioned to elected officials. As more populous areas developed, more services were demanded by the public. By the 1930's many counties had become largely

urbanized, and the state provided for them to change their structure through charters, allowing them to respond more effectively to the need for more complex services. In 1963, Article IX of the state constitution provided for home rule.

At this time, 20 counties have adopted charters. Most are the heavily populated southern counties and the more metropolitan counties to the north and west. Sullivan County, (although rather rural) elected a charter form of government in the 1990's.

Ulster County's legislature became interested in exploring the possibility of a charter and in August 2004 unanimously resolved to authorize a commission to determine whether a charter was appropriate for Ulster's needs and if so to suggest the scope and content in a document.

The factors impelling this decision were that the county is experiencing growth and its annual budget has expanded to \$300 million. The increasing population is spurring further economic development. Additionally there were bi-partisan concerns that a part time legislative body, however dedicated, may not be adequate to cope with the burgeoning needs of the county efficiently.

The Charter Commission was appointed to proceed in an objective and nonpartisan manner. The volunteer group was authorized for 18 months and has conducted countless interviews with elected and appointed officials locally and from other counties. It has reviewed other counties' charters. In April 2005, it concluded that Ulster County could benefit from adoption of a charter designed to meet our unique needs. The commission

proceeded slowly and deliberately to assure thoroughness.

Dr. Benjamin summarized the salient provisions of the proposed document.

- * The already publicly endorsed size of the legislature should be reduced from 33 to 23.
- * The legislature should be elected from single member districts by a plurality in partisan elections.
- * The legislature should serve 4 year staggered terms with no term limits.
- * An independent Reapportionment Commission should redistrict the legislature after each 10-yr. census.
- * A full-time county executive should be elected for a 4-year term with no term limits.
- * There will be a separation of executive and legislative powers.
- * The countywide elected Treasurer will be replaced by a countywide elected Comptroller and an appointed Commissioner of Finance. The Comptroller will audit the county's books and conduct performance reviews. The Finance Commissioner will serve as chief fiscal officer administering financial policy, receiving and disbursing funds, collecting taxes, maintaining tax records and filing annual financial statements. A Budget Director will be included in this office.
- * There will also be a Periodic Compensation Review Board, mandated charter review by an independent body, and an Inter-Municipal Collaboration Council to promote positive county-town relations.

There is public concern about the expenses that would be incurred by a county executive and additional staff. Benjamin handed out charts indicating little difference

in administrative costs between chartered and unchartered counties. Some elements of the system would cost more, but the overall system should have savings effected by improved supervision under the aegis of the comptroller. The current system is not working and an alternative is essential.

In the question and answer period, Frank Dart asked about full-time legislators. That had been considered and the difficulties outweighed the advantages.

Mayor Sottile asked if staggered terms for legislators would be confusing, and Benjamin answered that it would be OK once established and 4-year terms would reduce campaign pressures on legislators.

Margaret Sellers asked why the mental health board was to be advisory rather than policy-setting. The answer was that policy should be set by elected, not appointed officials. If both the county executive and the board set policy, there could be conflict. She also asked how the capital process would differ. The legislature would have overall oversight and the county executive would be responsible and accountable with financial analysis provided by the comptroller.

There were other questions as well. There is a need for voter exposure to the charter's ideas and purpose and for feedback for improvement, public awareness, involvement and approval.

Renee Sachs

Financing Education

Education is one of the most important investments we as a society make.

LWV NYS has been studying the financing of education to find out where the money comes from, where it goes, and how equitably it is distributed within the state. The state is now asking local leagues to come to consensus on our stand on education within New York State. Since our league did not participate in the state study, we are asked to look at their findings and use those as a basis for our stand. Last month we had an article on STAR, and this month we have more information from the state.

Last year New York had an income of almost \$99 billion. Where did it come from? These amounts are in billions of dollars:

- * 37.48 from Federal Government
- * 28.38 from personal income tax
- * 13.71 from consumption and use taxes
- * 5.70 from business taxes
- * 3.45 from patient health and patient fees
- * 1.82 from other taxes
- * 7.94 from miscellaneous
- * .113 from tobacco settlement

“Miscellaneous” includes lottery revenues, which were about 6 billion.

Of that money, what goes to education?

- * About \$2 billion of the lottery revenues
- * \$20 billion to K-12 education
- * \$2 billion to higher education
- * \$3 billion to STAR program

That constitutes about 44% of the money spent on education. 49% came from local sources and 7% from federal sources.

This combined utilization of income, sales, property and miscellaneous taxes and the lottery revenues to support education has been a long-standing tradition. The

funding mix has varied over time, depending on the fiscal health of the funding units, with the state share of education funding varying from about one-third to one-half the total. Local funding mostly comes from property taxes, with other taxes supplying a varying amount from district to district.

New York State distributes aid to schools by four methods:

- * Flat grant per pupil, used for textbook aid, gifted and talented aid, and flat grant operating aid
- * Wealth-equalized fixed amount of state aid per pupil, an allowance amount per pupil equalized in relation to district fiscal capacity. Poorer districts receive more of this type of aid. Formula Operating Aid is distributed in this fashion.
- * Effort or expense-based aid. This aid equals the State Share, a wealth-equalized percentage reimbursement for expenses previously approved by the state. This includes Transportation Aid, Building and BOCES Aids, and a portion of Formula Operating Aid.
- * Tax relief through the STAR program to reduce local property taxes.

Is the system equitable? New York State school districts spend vastly different amounts on educating their children. Low-spending counties spend a little over \$6,000 per child, while others spend over \$11,000 per child. The differential seems to have decreased somewhat over the past 20 years, but is now holding fairly steady with wealthy counties spending about 85% more money than poorer counties.

The disparity between district spending is related to the wealth of the districts. Wealthy districts in NYS may have real estate valuations of \$600,000 per student and income per student of about \$300,000. In poor districts, the real estate valuation is under \$160,000 and income per student about \$67,000. This means, of course, that poorer districts must tax real estate at a higher rate to approach the spending of wealthier districts.

The short and long-term loss to society of failing to provide children with an adequate education is great. Aside from the personal pain of attending poor schools and feeling inadequate, there are quantitative social costs:

- * A high school dropout earns about \$260,000 less than a graduate over a lifetime, and pays \$60,000 less in taxes
- * The US loses \$50 billion in state and federal taxes annually from its high school dropouts
- * The US loses 1.6% of GDP in combined income and other tax revenue losses with each cohort of 18 year olds who never completes high school. Increasing educational attainment by one year would recoup nearly half these losses
- * The US could save at least \$7.9 billion annually in the cost of governmental welfare and food and housing support

programs by improving educational attainment

- * Increasing the high school completion rate for all men aged 20-60 by one percent would cut the annual cost of crime by up to \$1.4.
- * The demographics of the county are such that there will be a shortfall of 7 million college educated workers by 2012.

Many things need to be done to improve the situation. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity has won law suits requiring that the state spend more money in New York City to provide an adequate education, although the state has not yet funded that.

Other ways of increasing educational attainment are by increasing participation in model preschool programs. This has been shown to reduce dropout rates, boost academic achievement, and lower the risk of teen parenting, drug use and criminal violence. Their economic benefit of such programs has been shown to be as much as \$7 for each dollar invested. The Schools for New York's Future Act, which would alter the way the state funds education and attempt to implement the Campaign for Fiscal Equity order throughout the state, would give poorer districts a more level playing field for those districts without reducing state aid for wealthier districts.

Education Consensus

We are holding a consensus meeting for the education study on May 23 from 7:00 to 9:00 at City Hall, Kingston, conference room 1. There will be an educational presentation that evening prior to the vote on consensus, but members are urged to study the material in the issues of the *Commentator* that precede that meeting.

Local Studies for Next Year

Now is the time to be thinking about what we as members of the LWV of the Mid-Hudson Region want to propose as studies for this coming year. Suggestions must be given to the Board of Directors by April 4th so that they can consider them and formulate a proposed program. If a proposed recommendation from a member is not recommended by the board, the membership can vote to consider it (by a simple majority) and, if desirable, adopt it by a 2/3 majority. Proposals approved by the board can be accepted by a simple majority.

Local study proposals must be sent out to the members at least four weeks before the annual meeting, and they should appear in the May *Commentator*.

Changes to the program can be made during the year, if information about the changes is sent to members two weeks before the general meeting at which it will be discussed. Changes then can be voted on at a subsequent general meeting. Local studies are one of the things the LWV does best, and pertinent studies attract new members.

Health Care Meetings in Dutchess

There will be a free community forum "Examining Health Care: What's the Public's Prescription?" held on Saturday, April 1 from 9 am to 3 pm at Dutchess County Community College. This is one of the National Issues Forums which Dutchess sponsors on different topics each year. It will include small groups of citizens debating alternative approaches to health care and a panel of national experts.

As a follow up to this forum, the League, together with the American Association of University Women and the Older Women's League, will host a discussion on Saturday, May 6th from 2 to 4 pm at the Friends Meeting House, 249 Hooker Avenue, in Poughkeepsie. The discussion, entitled "What's the Best Cure for the Health Care Crisis?" will focus on legislation now before Congress and in Albany to improve health care delivery to more Americans. The costs and benefits of these plans will be discussed by a panel of experts. We hope participants will leave the discussion with enough information to lobby their elected representatives.

For directions or more information on either of these sessions, contact Ellie Charwat by email echarwat@yahoo.com or telephone her at (845) 462-7061.

We clearly have a crisis on health care in this country. Everyone needs to gather information, form opinions, and make our voices heard. The current League position is for single-payer, universal health care. proceeded slowly and deliberately to assure thoroughness.

Legislative Report

Well it's official, fiscal reform is happening! The full legislature passed its first test by passing a very unpopular spending cut. The stage was set, the press was waiting and the agency that was facing the cuts had filled the chambers with its supporters. For a moment it looked as if the usual capitulation would take place. However, the majority of the Democrats stood behind what the special bi-partisan committee had recommended and costs were cut. It wasn't much, \$ 30,000 dollars, but it did send a distinct message that this legislature is committed to reduced spending.

I am not going to report on who voted this way or that, because it will not give you the whole picture, at least the way I see it. The way I see it is that there has been a real paradigm shift in this legislature toward fiscal responsibility. Not every legislator is there yet, and some may never get there (their voting record over time will tell) but there seems to be a growing commitment to reduce spending and hold down property taxes.

This will be no easy task, as they will have to sacrifice political posturing for the public good. They will also have to keep to their resolve as the various agencies start maneuvering to keep their budgets from being cut.

The one thing we can do as citizens is to keep reassuring our representatives that they are keeping their election promises and we commend them for it.

Tom Kadgen

State Board Report Items

The next State Convention will be in May, 2007, in White Plains. Volunteers are needed to help with budget, bylaws, and onsite support committees now. There will be speakers, a silent auction, and workshops. Anyone interested in working on those can call (716) 672-4275 or e-mailo Marcia Merrins at mmerrins@netsync.net.

LWVNYS is looking for corporate sponsors for its Smart Voter website. Contact the LWV state office if you have any ideas for sponsors.

An advocacy publication available from the LWVNYS office, called *LWV the Citizen Lobbyist-Quick Start*, can be obtained by calling . Stephanie Lopez at (518) 465-4162.

The final report on Judicial Election Reform came out in February, 2006. Call Cindy Bell at (845) 336-5763, or email Cbell1000@aol.com for the Board Report.

Gladys Gifford is LWVNYS Off-Board specialist for Transportation. The NYS DOT has issued its long-range transportation plan and information and the draft plan are available on www.state.ny.us.

Public support for S3153, the Community Preservation Act, is needed to enable communities to preserve open land by levying a transfer tax on real property transactions.

Statewide debates hosted by ten Leagues for primary and general election of governor, attorney general, and Legislature seats will be held this fall.

Any ideas for a pleasing and informative Voters Guide design will be welcomed by State Voter Service.

Membership News

We have another new member this month. Rhoda Lohre, whom many of us know, has joined the League after being an interested and supportive non-member for a long time.

Shirley Kobran reports that the membership committee is sending out information packets to 13 prospective members, and that the committee hopes to follow up with members who are dropping out. We would like to find out how to make us more attractive and relevant to them.

Another reminder for members and friends who have internet access: we have a useful and accessible website (<http://midhudson.ny.lwvnet.org>), which has the *Commentator* and more detail than we can always send out on paper. Do check out the website and refer to it regularly.

Book Repair

Many thanks to Pat Kinstrey! The book repair group, which meets at Elizabeth Askue's every month, has been given a very nice gift by Pat Kinstrey of Esopus. When Pat learned of the League project to bring books into children's homes, she provided us with dozens of colorful book marks to insert in them. These books are given to organizations to give to children to take home and keep. We have repaired and given away over eleven thousand books. All are welcome to join us at Elizabeth's.

Annual Meeting Announcement

The Annual Meeting will take place in June as usual, June 20, with the usual delicious potluck supper. We don't yet know the place, which will be in the next *Commentator*. **Save the date!**

Freihofer Run for Women and Community Walk

Be part of the League team at the Freihofer's Run for Women on Saturday, June 3. Join Leaguers from all over the state in this year's Freihofer's Run for Women in Albany. Have fun while increasing League visibility as you participate in the community walk, 5K run, help the League at the membership/voter registration booth, or simply cheer others on from the sidelines. Mark your Calendar now, start training, and get more information in the next newsletter.

Show the Sporty Side of the League! We can be jocks as well as thinkers!

Report on Medicare Meeting

Medicare D has been a puzzle to many people, and the meeting on February 18th was called to demystify it as much as possible. About forty people gathered at Kingston City Hall to hear experts on the somewhat complex subject.

Speakers were be Blanche Duffy, the coordinator of the Health Insurance Information Counseling Assistance Program for the Ulster County Office of the Aging (HIICAP); Timothy Higgins, the district manager of the Kingston Field Office of the Social Security Administration; and Laura Mulvihill, the New York EPIC Outreach representative.

Blanche Duffy pointed out that Medicare-D is not mandatory. If you have a "creditable" drug plan already, you do not need to enroll. Your current plan should have notified you if you already have creditable coverage. You should save the letter, as it may save you from having a bigger Medicare-D premium if you switch later.

If you have no such plan, you need to determine what plan of the available 47 plans in Ulster County is best for you and sign up by May 15, 2006. Late signup raises your premiums. The Office for the Aging will counsel you but you need to make an appointment and bring an exact list of the medications and dosages you are taking. Premiums range from \$4.10 to \$85.00 per month, and co-payments also vary greatly.

Tim Higgins said that the Social Security Office is collecting applications for extra help. If you are on full Medicaid, on SSI, or have Medicaid paying part of your Medicare

A&B premiums, extra help is automatic. If you are not qualified in one of those categories, you need to make an application for extra help. www.socialsecurity.gov has a great deal of useful information. For application help, you can make an appointment locally or call 800-772-1213.

Laura Mulvihill, EPIC representative, explained that the EPIC program qualifies as "creditable coverage" and that it help senior citizens with high prescription costs. To qualify, you must be over 65, a New York State resident, and have an income no greater than \$35,000 (single) or \$50,000 (married). All the prescription plans work with EPIC and it provides an open formulary and an open enrolment. EPIC and Medicare D work together to cover prescription costs, even during the gap of \$2500 in the middle of the coverage. If you are on EPIC, the coordination of benefits happens automatically. The amount of help EPIC provides is based on income.

People can change plans once a year. If the plan you are with changes its formulary (the drugs it will supply), it must give 60 days written notice and provide an equivalent alternative.

The bad news is that there were a number of problems in establishing the system and joining people appropriately. This is being dealt with.

A person with Power of Attorney can sign someone up to a plan, and nursing home social workers can help. The good news is that there are a number of places to go for help, and the system, although complicated, can be worked with.

Membership Forms

Membership Application

Join now for membership to 6/07.

Fill out the following fields and mail with the appropriate size check to the LWV Treasurer,
PO Box 3564, Kingston, NY 12402.

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

E-Mail: _____

New ____ **or Renewal** ____

Family membership: \$65. ____

Individual member: \$50. ____

Phone about meetings __yes__ no

Send e-mail notices __yes__ no

Extra contribution: \$ ____

If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution, please make out a separate check payable to the LWVNY Education fund. Our chapter can use this money for educational programs.

The Commentator is available on our website. Do you need a copy mailed to you? __yes__ no

If you know someone who might like to know more about the League of Women Voters, please give us his or her name and address and send this slip to:

Shirley Kobran
53 Schuler Lane,
Lake Katrine, NY 12449.

We will send out information as soon as possible.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Your name: _____

Do you have any comments about the League or our programs? Shirley would like to hear them too.

ABOUT THE LEAGUE

Mission Statement:

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

Non-Partisan Statement

The League of Women Voters of the Mid-Hudson Region is a nonpartisan organization which does not support or oppose candidates for public office but does encourage its members as individuals to participate actively in the political process. The League acts on those issues the membership chooses for study and action. Board members will use discretion in any political activity and determine in advance from the local and/or state board that such activity will not compromise the nonpartisan political policy of the League of Women Voters.

LWV of the Mid-Hudson Region

We cover the Mid-Ulster County area and the Dutchess County area. We belong to the LWV of New York State and the LWV of the US.

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