

March-April 2014

LWV THE VOTER

The League of Women Voters Kansas City/Jackson/Clay/Platte Counties

www.lwvkc.org – email. lwvkcjcp@yahoo.com 816-464-1800

Join us for our next meeting

Saturday, March 15, 2014

Community Christian Church 4601 Main; Kansas City, MO 64112

Agriculture Study Consensus

9:30—Social Time

10:00—11:30 **Leiann Nelson**, Senior Underwriter for the U.S.D.A. will speak to us about **Federal Crop Insurance**.

11:30-12:00 Break for lunch, brown bag or make a run to Subway

12:00-2:00 Members of the Agriculture Committee lead by Pauline Testerman will conduct **the Agriculture Consensus Meeting**.

President's Message - Linda Vogel Smith

This is a very important election year. All members of the U.S. House of Representatives and one-third of the U.S. Senate must stand for election in November. Similarly, there are State legislature elections as well as votes to be taken on important ballot initiatives. In Kansas City, MO, there will be a closely watched school board election as well as assorted local ballot initiatives throughout the area. Your League of Women Voters promises to be active -- registering new voters, holding candidate and issue forums and working to educate people about the issues they need to address at the polls.

Our attention is also riveted on the numerous dimensions of how to improve the practice of voting and ensuring that it does not become harder for people to vote. The Presidential Commission on Election Administration has just issued its report. Watch for commentary on the

Commission's findings and recommendations in the media. The Commission's recommendations are wide-ranging and directed toward making voting easier and more accessible. For example, the Commission believes that technologies that were not available to us thirty years ago (e.g., the possibility of registering to vote and then voting on-line) need to be put into practice. That said, the Commission concedes that their recommendations are really "suggestions" and that implementation lies in the hands of states and local levels of government. We need to advocate for positive change in voting practice, taking into account the Commission's recommendations.

Voting hours need to be expanded, not restricted. Carpools to get people to the polls need to be arranged (churches, neighborhood associations and others can help do this). Technologies for voting need to be improved. People who are entitled to vote should not be required to search for birth certificates and other proof of citizenship in order to register to vote. All people who are eligible to vote should know that their vote counts.

As the year progresses and election campaigns heat up, we will again see the impact of special interest groups and big money on the electoral process. The impact of the Supreme Court's decision on Citizens United vs the Federal Election Commission, in which corporations are viewed as having the same rights as people and money in the form of donations to candidates, political parties and political action committees is seen as free speech, will become increasingly apparent. Against this background, at its January 18 Planning Meeting, our League decided to recommend to LWVUS that the LWVUS' current policy position on Election Financing be studied and updated, taking into account the possibility even of Constitutional amendment. Our recommendation, along with those of other Leagues will be considered by the LWVUS Board when it meets in April. Decisions will be made on studies at the June LWV convention to be held in Dallas.

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NEWS BRIEFS FROM

Voter Suppression: In January, for our regular monthly meeting, we joined with the Kansas City Chapter of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to host a seminar on **voter suppression**, with emphasis on Missouri. This was particularly timely, in light of the Missouri legislature's consideration of proposed legislation to require more rigorous identification (namely a government-issued photo ID) as a requirement for voting.

Ending Gun Violence: In January, our Board made a decision to focus greater attention on **ending violence, notably gun violence**. In 2013, Kansas City, MO, proved yet again to be one of America's deadliest cities with over 100 murders and countless attempted homicides. On January 13, our League hosted a "table talk" evening event during which we focused on a set of guidelines and actions proposed for action by the Mayor and the City Council to make Kansas City a safer place. Members of our League were part of the process to develop those

guidelines, which had been adopted by the KCMO Health Commission and sent to the City Council for consideration and action. In February, our League joined a coalition, with leadership provided by the Missouri-Kansas Grandmothers Against Gun Violence, in order to enhance communications among like-minded groups to influence better public policy and action. This coalition of organizations currently represents over 2,000 women and men in the greater Kansas City area, and it continues to grow. League members participated also in the inaugural meeting of a KCMO Health Commission Task Force directed toward enhancing programs to address the root causes, not just the symptoms, of violence. This will be an ongoing effort driven by the KCMO Health Commission and the participating organizations, including the KCMO Police Department, Aim4Peace, the Platte County Prosecutor's office, Communities Creating Opportunity, and many more.

KCMO Education Issues: In February, our League held an evening "table talk" event on the proposed state ballot initiatives related to education—one to provide tax credits to private educational institutions and the other on teacher performance evaluations and tenure. The League co-sponsored, on February 24, a voter forum involving all of the candidates for election to the Kansas City Public Schools School Board.

Candidate Forum for Independence Mayor and City Council: On March 13 at 7:00 p.m., the League will co-sponsor a **Candidate Forum for the Independence Mayor and City Council races. The location is the North Independence Branch of Mid-Continent Public Library, 24 Highway and Spring** (across from the Truman Library – 816 252-0950).

Medicaid Expansion: In February, our League signed, along with approximately 150 other organizations, a "Medicaid Expansion Sign-on Letter" developed by the Missouri Medicaid Coalition. This letter calls upon Missouri elected officials to expand Medicaid to cover all adults up to 138% of the Federal Poverty level. We will continue to track this effort and will contribute our views and support as we can. Such an expansion would provide an estimated 300,000 people with insurance coverage.

Where Will the Flood of Money in Elections End?

Mary Lindsay MoveToAmend.org

How many billions will federal elections cost before Americans demand change?

In 2012, money spent to influence congressional elections exceeded \$4 Billion. Total spending for the Obama and Romney campaigns

The campaign finance rules in federal elections are horrendous, but Missouri's campaign finance rules are even worse—in fact, the worst in the nation. In Missouri elections, any person, any corporation and any group can donate unlimited dollars to any candidate.

EACH topped \$1 Billion! How much is too much?!

Any day now the US Supreme Court will rule on *McCutcheon v. FEC*—the case of a wealthy Alabama man who sued the Federal Election Commission over current limits on political donations.

Since 1976, the Supreme Court has held that only direct “donations” to a candidate’s campaign can corrupt the candidate. Consequently, the Court allows limits on donations to federal candidates, political parties and PACs and a cap of \$123,200 on the aggregate (total) amount an individual can donate in a two year election cycle. (See OpenSecrets.org for details.)

The *McCutcheon* case does not contest the limit on donations to individual candidates, party committees, etc., but challenges the aggregate cap. If the Supreme Court overrules the FEC’s \$123,200 aggregate donation limit in *McCutcheon*, a wealthy individual would be free to donate up to \$3.6 million (70 times the median household income) to one party and all its federal candidates per election cycle.

In 2010, only 0.26% of Americans gave \$200 or more to any federal candidate; only 0.05 gave the maximum amount to any federal candidate; and only 0.01% gave \$10,000 or more to federal candidates. Clearly, a very few super-rich Americans already enjoy an overarching influence on elections and surely on those who are elected. If the Supreme Court strikes down the aggregate donation limit, the voices of ordinary Americans will be further muffled.

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Water Study

Cheryl Barnes

In the U.S., we now are facing droughts, water shortages and issues with chemicals in our water supplies.

Locally, we have recently seen the Missouri River flood, storm sewers overflow, water and storm sewer pipes break sending both clean and untreated water down streets and into waterways rather than clean water into our homes and untreated water to the treatment plant.

We have a large and growing world population, placing more demands on our limited world-wide water supplies.

We have unprecedented demand for both agribusiness and industrial uses. Infusions of chemicals for fracking make the water unusable. Chemical applications make water hazardous to both wildlife and humans.

The Kansas City League's water study committee has had several meetings and reviewed contemporary material that will be helpful in updating the local position. The local position will support both the national and state positions.

The committee, headed by Pauli Kendrick, along with Carol Adams, Cheryl Barnes, Dawn Elmore-Fricke and Armand Matthews shared material and when possible, met.

We'll present information and suggest language to update our local position. We hope you can join us for more information at the meeting April 19.

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EDUCATION

Pauli Kendrick

The League of Women Voters of Missouri believes equality of opportunity in education is a state responsibility. The League will continue to support adequate financing, quality program, and early childhood education.

The League will monitor legislation introduced to address unaccredited or provisionally accredited school districts and the current student transfer law.

Several proposals and recommendations have been made public. These include:

1. CEE-Trust, an Indianapolis-based think tank, presented their recommendation for Kansas City public schools with a possible model for other MO unaccredited schools to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
2. Kansas City Public Schools outlined improvements and offered its own reforms.
3. "New Path to Excellence" was developed by area superintendents and the MO Association of School Administrators.
4. A position paper on "Improving Unaccredited Schools in Missouri" was issued by the Cooperating School District of St. Louis.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education held a public meeting on January 29 at the Paseo Academy in Kansas City to discuss the proposed CEE-Trust plan and other proposals.

Several initiative petitions to offer tax certificates, equating to tax credits, for donations to private and charter schools have been approved for circulation by the MO Secretary of State.

The League is concerned about the negative impact that such tax credits would have on public school funding.

Student Transfer Law: Pressure for action has intensified because of a state law that allows families in unaccredited districts with the cost of tuition and transportation to be paid by the unaccredited districts.

Some lawmakers and education officials had hoped the Department of Education would consider a policy move to evade the transfer law; but, Chris Nicastro, State Education Board President and the Board decided against it. The Department has recommended keeping the “unaccredited” classifications that trigger the transfer law, leaving the responsibility to address the law with the legislature.

Forum Helpers and Moderators Needed

Charles Steele

Preparatory to the up-coming election cycle [August and November] , the Forums committee is putting out the call for any Leaguer interested in Moderating or assisting in Forums. Please let Charles Steele know by March 21 [forums1wv@yahoo.com]. A Moderator Training/Refresher class will be presented for all those interested.

Don't know if you can moderate? Contact Charles for a “Shadowing” assignment and test the waters.

Note:

There will also be a Candidate Forum for Independence Candidates for Mayor on Thursday, March 13 at 7:00 pm at the North Independence Branch of Mid-Continent Public Library, 317 W US 24 Hwy, Independence, MO 64050. (816) 252-0950.

202-263-1329 Agriculture Study

Pauline Testerman

One of the background articles for the agriculture study is Chapter 8 of the daunting "Economic Report of the President (2013)." There is a lot of interesting information in Chapter 8, which deals with agriculture that I am going to summarize. This article covers only a portion of the full report. You may read the full chapter at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/ERP-2013/html/ERP-2013-chapter8.htm>.

Agriculture fared better than other sectors in the great recession, and is considered a bright spot in the U. S. economy. Net farm income was forecast to total \$12.8 billion. The 2012 income figure was the second highest since 1974 after adjusting for inflation. This strength is

due, in part, to the demand for American exports. The demand for exports accounts for 31 percent of gross farm cash income. Increasing demand from abroad, created by rising income and growing middle class, will present opportunities for U. S. agriculture.

In the 1920's, farm households accounted for more than 25 percent of the U.S. work force and generated approximately 8 percent of gross domestic product. Today farm households account for only 1.6 percent of the work force and generate approximately 1 percent of GDP. The agriculture sector is still vital to our country, but growth in other sectors of the economy and rapid gains in agriculture productivity has lowered the relative prices of agricultural products. The structure of farming continues to move toward fewer but larger commercial operations producing the bulk of farm commodities. Small family farms (those with annual sales less than \$250,000) make up 90 percent of U. S. farms. They hold 62 percent of all farm assets, including 49 percent of the land owned by farms. However commercial farms, which make up the other 10 percent of the sector, account for 83 percent of the value of U. S. production. Most large farms have a positive profit margin but small farms have a negative profit margin because of high operating costs, low sales, and lower productivity. Farms are predominantly organized as sole proprietorships (86.5 percent), followed by partnerships (7.9 percent), and corporations (4.4 percent). The Department of Agriculture has a broad definition of what constitutes a farm, which includes farms where the principal operator is retired or has a main occupation other than farming ("residence farms"). In 2011, only 46 percent of principal operators of farms reported that farming was their main occupation.

The average age of U.S. farmers and ranchers has been increasing over time. By 2007, 30 percent of all farms were operated by producers over 65. The reason is that farmers are living longer and often reside on their farms, never retiring. One third of beginning farmers are over age 55. In 2011, the average farm operated 415 acres and held assets worth just under \$1 million, accounted for mostly by land and structures. The federal government recognizes the need to support and develop new farm operators. Through the Farm Service Agency, the USDA helps beginning farmers who are unable to obtain financing from commercial lenders, by targeting a portion of its direct and guaranteed loan funds to farmers and ranchers who have not operated a farm or ranch for more than 10 years and do not own a farm or ranch greater than 30 percent of the median size farm in the county.

Organic farming has been one of the fastest growing sectors in agriculture and there has been double digit growth in sales of organic foods. The retail value of the organic industry grew to \$31.4 billion a year in 2011. Organic sales currently account for 3 percent of the total U. S. food sales and provide a larger share in categories such as produce and dairy. The organic dairy sector accounted for 16 percent of organic sales in 2008. The USDA has taken steps to promote and regulate the organic food industry by establishing the National Organic Program. The NOP accredits nearly 50 domestic organic certifying agents who are authorized to issue an organic certificate to farms that comply with USDA organic regulations.

Persistent gains in efficiency have defined American agriculture and tripled farm productivity in the second half of the twentieth century. The nation must continue to invest in agricultural

research and development, helping farmers grow more with less, and continue stewardship of natural resources for future generations.

League Calendar

March 3—Board Meeting, 7:00, NKC Library, 2251 Howell, NKC 64116.

March 13—Candidates Forum, 7:00, North Independence Mid-Continent Public Library; 317 E U.S. Hwy24; Independence, MO 64050.

March 15—Agriculture Study, 10:00, Community Christian Church; 4601 Main; KCMO. Leian Nelson—Brown bag lunch—Agriculture Consensus, 12:00-2:00. Pauline Testerman.

April 5—State Conference—Springfield.

April 7-- Board Meeting, 7:00, NKC Library, 2251 Howell, NKC 64116.

April 19 –Water Consensus, 10:00, Community Christian Church; 4601 Main; KCMO. – Pauli Kendrick & Cheryl Barnes.

May 17 –Annual LWV/KCMO/J/C/P Counties Meeting –TBA. (Voting on officers and board and looking ahead for the year).

OFFICERS and BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President:	Linda Vogel Smith	816-741-6110	lindaavogel@me.com
Vice President:	Joan Mills	816-353-4106	jomills1637@sbcglobal.net
Secretary:	Anitra Steele	816-836-4031	anitrasteele@yahoo.com
Treasurer:	Elaine Lenz	816-942-5644	wlenz@kc.rr.com

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Charles Steele, Candidate and Issue Forums
Pauline Testerman, Agriculture Study Chair
Carolyn Weeks, Member Development

You will be pleased to notice our website continues to be updated.

Check it out at: <http://www.lwvkc.org>

Your suggestions would be appreciated.