

Inside Look at the Results of Florida's Legislative Session 2009

By Deborah Nelson, President, Pensacola League

As the pile of bills on the Governor's desk dwindles to a few stragglers, citizens might pause to reflect on what exactly our State lawmakers managed -- and failed -- to accomplish at this year's legislative session.

League of Women Voters Florida priorities this year focused on tax policy, fair elections redistricting and education funding. We also worked to ensure responsible oversight of environment and growth policy.

Unfortunately, we spent much of the session working against bad legislation, rather than advocating for good ideas.

The State of Florida relies heavily on regressive sales tax revenue. This places the burden disproportionately on the middle class. On top of that, numerous sales tax "exemptions" relieve special interests of paying their fair share along with everybody else.

The League supports changes to our fiscal structure that would equitably distribute tax responsibility and emphasize public needs like affordable driver's licensing services.

It's time to get rid of unfair tax exemptions that help special interests at the expense of the general public.

But despite our best efforts, no existing sales tax exemptions were repealed this year.

Instead, lawmakers worsened the burden on middle and lower income citizens by raising key public service fees. It's now more expensive to get a driver's license and a fishing license; or pay for title transfers, court fees and university fees.

We're pleased to note that lawmakers passed a health-conscious bill to raise cigarette and tobacco taxes, but this is not nearly enough to cover the deficit created by special-interest sales tax exemptions.

A bill that would have forced lawmakers to review sales tax exemptions on a regular basis never even made it out of committee.

Despite the fact that they benefit from state services like our policing and civil court systems, many of Florida's large corporations also get out of paying their fair tax share.

That's because a loophole in Florida law allows companies to assign Florida profits to subsidiaries in other states, and avoid paying tax on them. This year, a bill that would

have closed that loophole died in committee, as did separate measures to reduce other corporate tax havens.

Equitable taxing is a key element of our democracy. If all citizens don't pay their fair share of taxes, how can we have a government that serves all of us equally?

Speaking of equality in government, when it comes to lawmaking, it seems some citizens are considerably better represented than others in our legislature. Much of the problem has to do with the way our elections districts are divided.

Currently, "gerrymandered" districts break up voting populations into groups that are politically geared to benefit certain powerful interests -- at the expense of regular voters who just want to pick and choose who speaks for them in Tallahassee.

The League of Women Voters supports realigning election districts to reflect existing population and geography distribution, rather than the current system of politically expedient and often unrelated voter clumping.

Unfortunately, this year the League made little headway in establishing fair elections districts.

We'd like to see an independent commission study a fair way to redraw district lines. But a House bill that would have established such an authority never made it to any agenda. And the Senate never even filed a companion bill on this important fairness issue.

Fair elections districts are key element of our democracy. If citizens cannot elect officials who accurately represent the community, how can those officials be expected to represent citizen interests when it comes to forging the laws of the land?

Speaking of community interests, funding to ensure Florida's young people a quality education barely scraped by this year.

Like parents throughout Florida, the League of Women Voters supports a high-quality public school system that is financed adequately by the state through an equitable funding formula.

This year's schools funding budget represents a slight increase over last year. But this is only because lawmakers cut school funding in the middle of this year.

On average, school districts will actually get \$256 less per student next year than they received two years ago. This budget represents less spent for public education than in any school year since 2002-2003. And schools could face further cuts in a special session this summer.

On top of that, a bill that would have broadened middle school social studies requirements, and thus students' preparation for democratic citizenship, failed to pass.

Education is a key element of our democracy. If today's young people can't get a quality education that includes civics training, how can they function as tomorrow's citizens...or lawmakers?

Speaking of legislators, the League supports citizen access to the policymaking process as a check against too much government power. We are deeply concerned by efforts in recent years to reduce public participation in the constitutional amendment process...while at the same time increasing the Legislature's influence.

In fact, when it comes to citizens' rights to initiate policy changes, we're forced to question whose interests some lawmakers are really representing.

A bill that would have greatly increased the costs and risks of citizen initiative campaigning almost made it to vote this year. In the meantime, no bill to expand early voting or increase voter education even made it to committee.

And although we're pleased a bill to prevent local governments from campaigning on election issues passed, lawmakers failed to take an opportunity to correct public campaign financing problems by capping expenses. Instead they chose to vilify publicly funded campaigns. [insert info here, not sure what happened with the constitutional amendment]

Citizen initiative processes are a key element of our democracy. If citizens do not have access to our lawmaking mechanisms, how can the people be a check against the power of legislators or special interests?

Speaking of special interests, Florida's dwindling environmental resources took another beating this year from the powerful developer lobby.

Instead of finding a way to rescue Florida's few remaining unspoiled areas by funding Florida Forever, lawmakers pushed bills to dismantle existing growth management laws.

This legislation is being presented as a responsible growth management measure to discourage urban sprawl and concentrate development in already-dense city areas. Unfortunately, the bill's fine print tells a different story.

The language, in fact, allows local governments to opt out of state oversight on massive "developments of regional impact." It weakens requirements to ensure road capacity can handle new development.

A second bill would effectively destroy the authority of water management district board members, and eliminate the opportunity for citizens to weigh in on key decisions. The

Water Management Board would no longer vote on requests to withdraw water from the aquifer, rivers, lakes and other sources.

Instead, the districts' executive directors would make those decisions — and largely out of view of the public, who now may attend regularly scheduled board meetings.

In other words, developers who are denied withdrawals would get a last chance to plead their case to board members.

The League of Women Voters supports policies that provide for cooperative, coordinated planning for and decisions about land use in Florida. We promote citizen input in natural resource planning because it is critically important that citizens have the opportunity for input at all stages of approvals.

This legislation portends further damage to Florida's already-waning forest, wetland, beachfront and other natural resource lands. In addition to our fragile ecosystems, it threatens to worsen existing water shortage problems by exacerbating sprawl.

Now more than ever, Florida needs responsible, planned growth management oversight to preserve our unique, beautiful state lands for future generations.

Just like we need wise tax policy, fair elections districting and properly-funded education to preserve our schools, communities; and ultimately our democratic government; for our children and grandchildren.

But it's up to legislators to carry out our wishes. Please take time to contact your legislators and let them know what you think about their service to you, the citizen, this year.