

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF GREATER BIRMINGHAM

LOCAL PROGRAMS, SUPPORT POSITIONS

2006 – 2007

Adopted 5/20/2006

I. Government

A. Urban Government - Recognizing the interdependence of the city and the suburb, and the importance of area-wide services, and supporting a strong, vital city responsive and sensitive to the needs of its citizens, the League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports:

1. The cooperation of city and county governments;
2. The assumption of a more active role by the suburban cities in the search for:
 - a. Area solutions to issues which transcend jurisdictional boundaries (e.g. water quality, land use);
 - b. Equitable solutions of the funding issues specifically related to persons without money (e.g. transit, housing, health);
 - c. Creative solutions to the problems of the metropolitan area which are related to the urban crises;
3. Provision by the state government to local governments of the tools they require to solve their own problems;
4. A broader, more representative base of citizen participation on independent boards and agencies and more effective methods of communication between citizens and the independent boards and agencies.

B. Jefferson County Government - The LWVGB believes that the government of Jefferson County must fulfill certain minimum criteria, including equitable representation of the population of the county; separation of legislative and executive powers; administrative accountability to the total electorate; and efficient and cost-effective operation. To meet these criteria, the League supports:

1. Separation of the legislative and administrative functions of county government;
2. Election of the legislative body by district;

3. Consolidation of administrative responsibility in a single office responsible to the total electorate.

The present commission form, in combining the legislative and executive functions in one body and dividing specific administrative responsibilities among individual commissioners, lacks both efficiency and the American safeguard of checks and balances between the traditional branches of expanding governments. The consent decree of 1985 changing the commission to five members elected by district has, in fulfilling the criterion of equitable representation, severely limited administrative accountability to the electorate, as well as decreased operating efficiency by further fragmenting the administrative function. Thus, restructuring of the county government is now imperative. Administrative responsibility must be lodged in a single office accountable to the total electorate, either by at-large election of a county executive or by appointment of a professional manager responsible to the entire county through the commission. While both of these forms are widely used by counties throughout the nation, the inclusion of another elected office appears to exceed the federally approved judicial parameters in effect at this time. Therefore, the League recommends the adoption of a county manager form of government for Jefferson County. Under this form, the commission is the legislative and policy-making body. It sets the course of county government, enacts laws and allocates funds to implement its policies. It appoints a professional manager to carry out its policies and administer county operations under its direction. The manager should be a qualified professional trained in public administration or possessing equivalent managerial credentials. Appointment should be by at least a 2/3 vote of the commission. The manager should be exempt from civil service and should serve at the pleasure of the commission. County commission members should serve four-year staggered terms on a part-time basis and should reside in their districts for at least one year before election and remain residents throughout their terms. Vacancies should continue to be filled by special election.

II. Transportation - Adequate public transportation is a vital element in the well-being of any urban area, impacting on land use, economic development, air quality, employment opportunities, and mobility for all citizens. As such, it should be considered a public service whose operation is subsidized along with other public services.

To adequately serve the needs of the area, public transportation should be organized and funded at least on a countywide level, preferably encompassing the entire metropolitan area.

An area wide public transportation service should be planned on the basis of needs and efficiency, taking into account such factors as traffic congestion mitigation, air quality requirements, environmental quality and preferable land use. In order to accomplish this end, funding must be on an area wide basis so that service will not depend, as it does now, on the willingness of individual municipalities to purchase service for their communities. This requires a stable, equitable area wide funding source such as a dedicated portion of a gasoline tax or a fairly applied occupation tax. While an increased sales tax, being both regressive and overused, is not a preferred option, it may be the only realistic choice in our current tax system. It is recommended that it not be applied to food. Property tax, in view of its routine rejection despite the unfilled needs of education, would be an unrealistic choice.

Additionally, there should be state participation in funding: DOT funds allocated to the region, now directed almost exclusively to roads, should include significant funding for public transportation.

In order for area wide funding to be acceptable, representation on the Transit Authority also must be area wide and equitable. The current distribution - 5 Birmingham/ 1 Jefferson County/ 3 representing the 3 municipalities purchasing the most service - clearly does not meet that standard. Returning to the original concept of the enabling legislation with a 3 county/3 city/3 suburb division appears to be the most equitable. In any case, since no suburb will be a purchaser of a specific service, the selection of municipality representatives must be made by a group representative of all suburbs, such as the Jefferson County Mayors Association.

III. Education - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports effective public education in Greater Birmingham including adequate financing of total needs, extension of public education prior to the first grade, encouraging public involvement in local schools, and encouraging efforts to accredit local schools.

IV. Administration of Justice - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports diversion from the criminal justice system of those who could be treated in specific programs; use of community-base facilities leading to better rehabilitation and successful reintegration of offenders into the community; more uniform sentencing; and greater use of pretrial release, and the protection of basic human and civil rights of prisoners.

V. Natural Resources

- A. Air Quality - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports the enforcement of legislation to reduce air pollution; supports the provision of reasonable incentives and adequate financing for such reduction.
- B. Water Quality - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports:
 - 1. Regulations designed to alleviate non-point source pollution;
 - 2. Mandatory best management practices in development and construction activities;
 - 3. Zoning and subdivision regulation designed to protect flood plains and prevent flooding;
 - 4. Assessment of urban runoff to determine water quality problems resulting from urban and industrial runoff.
- C. Surface Mining - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports: Forfeiture of bond and denial of subsequent permits to owner-operators not complying with appropriate reclamation.
- D. Parks and Recreation - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports parks and recreation and the acquisition of more park land for public use and evaluation of proposed sales of park land with respect to potential use of land or money.
- E. Hazardous Materials (excluding nuclear)
 - 1. The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham reaffirms the position of the League of Women Voters of the United States that "the most fundamental way to attack the hazardous waste problem is at its source, by restricting the production and use of those substances so toxic that they present risks to health and the environment at every stage of their life cycle.

We favor innovative industrial processes that minimize or eliminate the production of hazardous by-products. We support the substitution of less hazardous materials in the manufacturing processes. We endorse recycling and resource recovery wherever feasible."

2. The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports:
 - a. Adequate funding to enforce state and federal regulations.
 - b. Strengthening state regulations so that they are as comprehensive as federal regulations, particularly in the regulation of private, intrastate carriers.
 - c. More stringent regulations of hazardous materials shipped by air or water.
 - d. Availability of specialized equipment and trained personnel to handle local accidents involving hazardous shipments.
 - e. Creating alternative methods to reduce the actual number of hazardous shipments, including the use of transfer stations.
 - f. Responsibility of local government to help assure the health and safety of citizens and the environment.

F. Nuclear Materials - The League of Women Voters of Greater Birmingham supports:

1. Efforts to focus public awareness on the dangers inherent in any serious accident involving shipments of high level, large quantity fuel and spent fuel wastes, and the inability of emergency procedures to prevent radioactive contamination.
2. Tighter control of transport of nuclear materials and waste, including pre-notification and other regulations that would enhance control.
3. Strengthening federal and state requirements in order to insure the health and safety of citizens and the environment; providing adequate funding to enforce state and federal regulations.
4. The power of local government to regulate nuclear transport in the absence of adequate regulation at the federal and state levels. This regulation might include, if necessary, controlling or banning shipments of high-level, large quantity fuel and spent fuel wastes.

Study of Healthcare for the Uninsured and Underinsured in Jefferson County

This study will focus on true access, especially as it applies to preventive care and follow-up for chronic situations. Acute care may be considered at a future date.

Items for Emphasis

1. Member education on the position supporting a county manager form of government for Jefferson County - a member education on the effect of the current operation of Jefferson County Government on accountable, efficient, cost effective and responsive government. Members should be informed through Voter articles and a general meeting. Estimate of people needed: a board chair and a County Commission observer.
2. Informational updates on transportation and natural resources issues in the metro area, review of League transportation and natural resources positions to determine if they cover the issues and identification of opportunities for action.