

The Mississippi Voter

League of Women Voters of Mississippi
February 2006



President's Corner

Leaving this most unforgettable past year, we in Mississippi are showing courage strength and determination in moving ahead. Many agencies, organizations, government entities and individuals are providing help. The facts are, however, that there are many gaps that have to be filled and many urgent individual needs that have to be met.

LWVMS board members will visit with the Gulf Coast League Board February 14th to work with them on ways they can help make an impact on the Gulf Coast's current issues and its direction for the future.

Also in this *Voter* is an article from the "**Mississippi Economic Review and Outlook, December 2005**". This report can be reviewed at www.ihl.state.ms.us Click on "University Research Center" at left and scroll to bottom.

Three other reports worth checking out are:

1. "**Early Perspectives on Recovery from Hurricane Katrina, a Status Report on Selected Recovery Issues**," a report of the standing committees of the MS House of Representatives.
2. "**After Katrina: Building Back Better Than Ever**." This can be viewed at www.governorscommission.com/
3. A review of the "**Governor's Summary of Recent Congressionally Authorized or Proposed Katrina Assistance**," by the PEER Committee staff can be viewed at www.peer.state.ms.us

Mark your calendar and plan to attend our yearly **Legislative Visit Day** (see enclosed flyer). It is the day League members gather at the State Capitol to be updated on issues we have studied that are important to all Mississippians and then communicate with our Legislators about them.

Ellen Russak, Starkville, has joined the state board as Communications Director and is on "*The Voter*" Committee. **Jane Lindsey**, Coast League, is going to cover the Civil Liberties program area and **Mary Margaret Bollinger**, Jackson, has agreed to chair the judicial program.

Special thanks to **Stacy Callendar**, editor of our **LWVMS Citizens' Calendar**, and **Kirt and Kelly Bush**

for their hard work on the project. This is our largest money raising project of the year. You can still purchase LWVMS Citizens Handbook Calendars for \$10 by e-mailing me at Fleber@AOL.com or call 601-956-2507 or order from LWVMS, P.O. Box 55505, Jackson, MS 39296. Make your check payable to LWVMS.
Peace, **Fran Leber**

REPORT ON MS LEGISLATION

(Our League President has been busy in Jackson monitoring and lobbying on the following issues)

Tobacco Tax Increase & Food Tax Decrease

Senate Bill 2310

This bill, increasing the tax on tobacco and lowering the taxes on food, sprinted out of the Senate sponsored by Senate Pro Tem Travis Little (R) and backed by Lt. Gov. Amy Tuck. The League has long supported a tax on tobacco and opposed regressive taxes such as the food tax that unduly impact low income citizens. The bill passed the Senate January 6.

In a procedural move, the Republicans kept the bill from the House floor by a vote of 64 to 54. After 3 hours of debate on January 11th, Rep. John Reeves (R), in a speech supporting the bill, was so impressive that when his time was up, everyone asked to extend his time; he is quite an orator! The bill passed with a 90 to 30 vote.

Mississippi is one of only 17 states that tax groceries. On the other hand, we have the second lowest tax on tobacco. There are many reasons we support increasing the Tobacco tax such as the proven decrease in teenage smoking after the tax goes up plus the money saved in health costs. There are, however, some issues that will have to be solved if the legislation passes.

The bill calls for a transfer of the money raised from the increase in the tobacco tax to be diverted to cities that would lose revenues from the decrease in their food taxes. The revenue from the tobacco tax would not be enough for many small cities to replace their food tax revenue. It is estimated that the state will lose approximately \$290,000. This money will have to be replaced somehow.

The bill passed the House in January. League members and many other supporters lobbied the Governor requesting his support. Disappointingly the Governor vetoed the bill. The Senate will vote on overriding the veto soon. Be prepared to lobby both houses to override the Governor's Veto.

Voting Issues

Voting Systems and Devices

HB Bill 562 authorizes bonding to provide funds to assist counties in acquiring voting systems and devices as mandated under The Help America Vote Act (HAVA). The federal funding did not come this year as Congress had promised, forcing our Secretary of State to request six-million dollars from the state through this bill. The revenue will be used for the purchase of new voting machines, upgrades such as adding a paper trail, and maintenance.

This bill was requested by the Secretary of State and sponsored by Education Chairman Tommy Reynolds (D). It was expedited through the house within the first week of the session with a vote of 112 to 8. The bill is supported by the LWVMS, Common Cause, the Circuit Clerks Association and the Supervisors Association.



Campaign Finance Reform

There are three bills in the Legislature that deal with campaign finance reform:

HB519 is the most comprehensive bill and it passed the House

January 17 with a vote of 99 to 22 with one abstention. It is similar to the 2005 bill.

There are two campaign finance reform bills in the Senate: **SB2307** and **SB2309**. SB2307 requires certain candidates to file reports electronically and increases allowable corporate contributions. Both of these bills are sponsored by Senator Terry Burton (R).

Rationale for LWVMS support:

1. Campaigns should be conducted openly and publicly
2. Campaign financing would enable challengers to compete effectively with incumbents.
3. Good campaign finance laws will reduce the undue influence that special interest group money can exert on those elected.

Dropout Prevention

HB 213 would create an **Office of Dropout Prevention** within the State Department of Education. The bill, sponsored by Chairman Cecil Brown (D), would put the Offices of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement under the Office of Dropout Prevention. It also requires school districts to implement a dropout prevention program for the 2008 school year. The bill passed the House on January 19th and has been sent to the Senate. **HB 214** designs a program for students who are interested in direct entry into the workforce and calls for a study of such programs. The bill passed the House January 18th and has been sent to the Senate. Representative Cecil Brown (D) is the sponsor of this bill also.

SB 2080 will change the law to allow a kindergarten child the choice of full-day kindergarten. Sen. Gray Tollison (D) is the sponsor of this bill.

SB 2059 requires compulsory Kindergarten attendance and is sponsored by Sen. David Jordan (D).

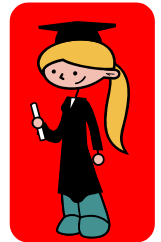
Rational for LWVMS supporting these bills:

1. 16,000 Students drop out of high school each year: almost 40%.
2. MS has one of the lowest high school graduation rates at 62.7 %. Only NY at 60.7% and Washington, D.C. at 59.8% are lower
3. Students' learning potentials are not the same and yet they have to and should be prepared with skills for their future and Mississippi's future.

"We have to believe that in the free exchange of ideas, justice will prevail over injustice, tolerance over intolerance and progress over reaction."
 --- Hillary Clinton

University Faculty and Staff Salary Increases

It is important for Mississippi's universities to have adequate financial resources to allow them to retain, attract, and reward the best possible faculty and staff.



The request is for a 15% increase in faculty and staff salaries over the next three years. This is a one percent increase for the system and totals \$9.4 million.

LWVMS Rational for supporting this increase:

1. Attracting and keeping quality faculty and staff requires Mississippi's Universities to offer salaries which are competitive with institutions in neighboring states. In fiscal year 2004, average faculty salaries in Mississippi were approximately \$7,800 lower than average faculty salaries in the Southern region; they were \$3,800 lower in 2000.
2. Competitive salaries allow the institution to recruit high-quality faculty and staff and to retain the current employees in which it has already made an investment.
3. There have been no raises for faculty and staff since FY 2000 other than a two-percent increase in FY 2003.

Early Voting

There are Early Voting bills in both houses: **HB 685 and SB 2493**. HB 685 extends early voting to 28 days preceding the election and ends early voting seven days before the election. These extended voting opportunities were requested by the Circuit Clerks Association and LWVMS supports them. The rationale is that they provide more accessibility for the voters and will help the Circuit Clerks manage the workload during election time.

Did You Know...?

>The nonpartisan **Freedom Forum's** annual survey shows that support for First Amendment rights ebbs and flows with national crises. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, 49% of Americans believed that the First Amendment went too far in assuring individual freedoms. This year, only 23% believe so, indicating that support for the First Amendment is up.



>Recent polls show that 77% of Americans think that patrons should be informed when the FBI requests their library records.

>Recent Gallup polls show that 41% of Americans think that the **PATRIOT Act** is "about right" in restricting civil liberties but that 6 of every 10 have an inaccurate understanding about it.

The Challenges of Katrina

Turning points in history very often occur when there is a crisis of some sort and there is an opportunity for change to occur either positive or negative. In the case of the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Katrina, there are some important issues and questions. In an article published by the "*Mississippi Economic Review and Outlook, December 2005*," Marianne Hill raised these questions:

1. Will the coastal community be drawn together and made stronger overall by the reconstruction process?
2. Will the natural beauty and resources of the Coast be preserved and enhanced by the emerging economy?
3. Will the visions of the Mississippi Renewal Forum become reality?
4. Will the Coast's elderly and low-income families be adequately provided for in the new coastal community?

She says that only time will tell. Clearly some individuals and businesses will not or cannot recover fully from the effects of the storm. However, the community as a whole will emerge from the crisis and decisions being made now will determine the shape of

the future. The discussions going on now are by no means all inclusive but they can serve as a starting point.

DISASTER ASSISTANCE IN RURAL AREAS

(Condensed from an article by Bob Neal, "*MS Economic Review and Outlook, Dec 2005*")

In the weeks since Hurricane Katrina made landfall along the Gulf Coast, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), the Red Cross and other public and private disaster relief organizations, have assisted many Mississippi residents affected by the storm. However, not all who were affected by the hurricane have benefited equally from this massive relief effort. Certain sub-groups in our society (the elderly, children, members of minorities, and other non-mainstream groups) are more vulnerable to disasters. Many of these same sub-groups are also more vulnerable during the relief and recovery period. Recent evidence from hurricanes and other disasters indicates that, "those who are most isolated - whether physically or socially - those with the fewest resources, and those who make the least noise are subject to oversight, discrimination and inequity in the provision of disaster relief services."¹ Rural residents and rural communities are one such group."



Robert Latham², director of MEMA, says he believes "...the key to providing disaster assistance in rural areas of the state is for MEMA to have a solid relationship with local emergency agencies and personnel already established before the disaster strikes." He continues, "Having local people in place to train the public how to plan for emergencies and take care of themselves in early hours and days after a disaster is essential." Latham said that he is increasing his staff to help assist the rural communities in building their disaster preparedness programs.

¹Baisden, Barbara and E.L. Quarantelli, "*The Recovery Period in U.S. Disasters*."

²Personal interview with Mr. Robert Latham, Director, MEMA, November 7, 2005.

Our League in the Year 2006 and Beyond

Have you become a CHARTER MEMBER of the **League of Women Voters Endowment Trust**? By contributing to the Trust you provide continuous benefits to the LWVMS. Send your contributions to the LWVMS Endowment Trust, PO Box 55505, Jackson, MS 39296-5505. This is used for taking action on issues and therefore is not tax deductible.

Call to National League Convention 2006



The theme for the 47th LWVUS Convention is **“Meeting in the Middle,”** and that is exactly what they plan to do. The meeting this year will be held in the beautiful city of Minneapolis, Minnesota – the middle of our nation. The dates are **June 10-13** and special rates have been arranged

for hotel and plane fares. Detailed information is on their website at www.lwv.org/convention and you will also find it in your Feb. *“National Voter.”*

The most exciting part of convention for me is meeting and networking with remarkable, like-minded women. Secondly would be the caucus strategy sessions where state and local leagues organize lobbying efforts in order influence the convention to vote for their study or program ideas; some caucuses stretch late into the night. Then there are the plenary sessions where the convention work gets done and decisions are made. Watching League women in action as they speak trying to sway the delegates to vote their way is a lesson in democracy. Legislatures could take lessons from our delegates!

Of course, there are also the fun dine-arounds where groups of Leaguers go to local restaurants and get to know the area and each other better; the banquet that includes entertainment; and speakers brought in to address the delegates on various topics.

In my 20+ years in the League, I've only missed one Convention – they are that much fun! I hope to see you there this year. **Ellen Russak**, Asst. Editor

LWV Mississippi First Call to Council

On years when we have a LWVUS Convention, State Leagues hold a Council. It is kind of like a mini-convention. Major work is done during Convention but there are still financial, program, and action issues to deal with in between. It is also a great opportunity to meet new friends and get together with old ones. League women are so marvelous!

This year our Council will be held on **May 13th (mark your calendars!)** at the Walthall Hotel in Jackson. More information will be in the next Voter and will be coming soon on our web site.



Our National League is Working Hard!!

Kay Maxwell, LWVUS President, is starting the New Year visiting several western states to promote the League's **Democracy Agenda**. The Democracy Agenda is an advocacy and public education effort to strengthen and renew the basic tenets of American democracy.

This effort seeks to protect our electoral processes through [election reform](#) and [campaign finance reform](#); advance our representative government through [nonpartisan redistricting](#); and preserve our constitutional rights by safeguarding [civil liberties](#).

Action by the National League (see more detailed accounts at www.lwv.org and in the *“National Voter”*)

League Announces Support for Six-Point Lobby Reform Plan

Earlier this month, the LWVUS and leaders of six other national reform groups held a press conference in Washington, DC releasing six benchmarks for judging the lobbying reform proposals being considered by Congress

The six benchmarks are:

1. Break the nexus between lobbyists, money and lawmakers: By capping contributions to candidates from lobbyists and lobbying firm PACs at \$200 per election; prohibiting lobbyists and lobbying firms from soliciting, arranging or delivering contributions and from serving as officials on candidate campaign committees and leadership PACs; and prohibiting lobbyists and their organizations from paying or arranging payments for events “honoring” members of Congress and political parties, and from contributing or arranging contributions to entities established or controlled by members of Congress, such as foundations.

2. Prohibit private interests from financing trips or subsidizing air travel for members of Congress and staff, executive branch officials, and federal judges. Corporations and others should be prohibited from making privately owned planes available for members to travel at the cost of a first class air ticket rather than the cost of a chartered plane.

3. Ban gifts to members of Congress and staff. The gift ban should close the existing loophole in the gift rules that allow lobbyists and others to pay for parties held to “honor” or “recognize” specific members, such as the lavish parties held at the national party conventions.

4. Oversee and enforce ethics rules and lobbying laws through an independent congressional Office of Public Integrity and increase penalties for violations. The office would monitor and oversee financial disclosure and lobbying reports, advise members, staff and lobbyists on compliance with the rules, conduct investigations of non-frivolous allegations of ethics violations, present cases involving potential ethics violations to congressional ethics committees for consideration and action, and refer potential lobbying law violations to the Justice Department for civil enforcement.

5. Slow the revolving door: This would prohibit members of Congress and senior executive branch officials from making lobbying contacts or conducting lobbying activities for compensation for two years after leaving their positions.

6. Place sunshine on lobbying activities and strengthen financial disclosure reports: This would require establishment of a robust disclosure system on the Internet; ensure that lobbying firms disclose grass-roots lobbying activities and that the financial backers of stealth lobbying coalitions are also disclosed; and require lobbyists to file a list of the members' offices and the congressional committees they lobbied during the quarter.

League Takes Aim at Partisan Redistricting

The LWVUS has called on the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the partisan gerrymander imposed on the citizens of Texas in 2003. The LWVUS and LWV of Texas filed an Amicus Curiae brief in the case of *LULAC v. Perry*.

Standing Up for Civil Liberties

On January 25, League members joined other concerned citizens in the National PATRIOT Act Call-In Day. There were many reports of jammed phone lines as thousands of calls poured into the Capitol.

Democracy Issues in the Second Session

LWVUS President Kay J. Maxwell sent a letter to members of the U.S. Senate encouraging them to pay close attention to a number of issues pending before Congress that go to the heart of the functioning of American democracy.

The Rules and the Refuge Were Preserved

Thanks in large part to the League's activists, at the end of 2005 the Senate upheld its rules and refused to allow the opening of the Arctic National



Wildlife Refuge to be included in the Department of Defense Appropriations (DOD) bill.



Education

Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) Funding Bill

MAEP provides equity funding for the public schools throughout Mississippi. It insures the poorer districts can offer the same level of instruction as wealthy districts. Enacted in 1997, the formula has only once been fully funded.

The formula includes teacher pay (including health insurance), costs for kindergarten programs, and other regular programs. Some administrative costs, special education, transportation, and the operation and maintenance of plants, are also part of the formula. The bill states that "adequate" means that the program establishes adequate current operation funding levels necessary for the programs of school districts to meet at least a successful Level III rating of the accreditation system as established by the State Board of Education.

The MS Department of Education's MAEP request for fiscal year 2007 calls in part for the replacement of one-time fund sources utilized in FY 06 to fund MEAP:

\$50,628,464

\$20,000,000

It also calls for the amount required to fund the MAEP formula:

\$87,714,498 Budget Contingency Funds

\$95,714,619 Formula Requirements

\$ 5,408,823 Add-on Increases

TOTAL MAEP NEEDS: \$259,466,404

Rationale for LWVMS's Support of MAEP

1. It supports the right of every child to reach his or her highest potential. MS's high unemployment rate is related to its large number of undereducated citizens. MS is the 46th lowest state in the nation in per-student educational spending. MS spends less than \$6,000 per student

2. If MS continues to underfund MAEP, it risks having the court mandate a solution that may not be a happy one.

"A woman is like a tea bag; you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water."

---Nancy Reagan

Gulf Coast May Not be Able to Rebound Ecologically

The Associated Press ran a story January 30th in the *Starkville News* reporting that last year's record hurricane season didn't just change life for humans, it changed nature too. Everywhere scientists look they see disrupted patterns in and along the Gulf of Mexico... altered by the force of hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Dennis.

Hurricanes have been kneading the Gulf Coast like putty for eons, carving out inlets and bays, creating beaches and altering plant and animal life, but up to now, the natural world has largely been able to rebound. The trees, marine life and shoreline features tourists and anglers enjoyed in recent years were largely the same types as those 17th century buccaneers and explorers encountered.

But scientists say the future could be different. Nature might not be able to rebound so quickly. The reason: the human factor. "Natural systems are resilient and bounce back," said Susan Cutter, a geographer with the University of South Carolina. "The problem is when we try to control nature, rather than letting her do what she does."

The seas are rising, the planet is getting hotter and commercial and residential development is snowballing. Add those factors to a predicted increase in nasty hurricanes and what results is a recipe for potentially serious natural degradation...

"It may bring about a situation in which the change is so rapid, it's something that's very different from what the ecosystem experienced over the last three, four-thousand years," said Kam-biu Liu, a Louisiana State University professor and hurricane paleoscientist. "We may be losing part of our beaches, we may lose our coastal wetland and our coastal forests may change permanently to a different kind of ecosystem."



Our Condolences

Coretta Scott King, widow of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., passed away January 31st. She was known as the First Lady of the Civil Rights Movement. The Reverend Jesse Jackson was quoted as saying, "(She was a) freedom fighter. Like all great champions, she learned to function with pain and keep serving." She will be sorely missed.

Sunshine Week 2006: Are We Safer in the Dark?

During the week of March 12-18, the LWVUS and several other national organizations will sponsor "**Sunshine Week 2006: Are We Safer in the Dark?**" The event will take place March 13, 2006 and will include a panel of distinguished speakers at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, carried via satellite feed to participating libraries around the country. Check with your libraries to see if they are participants although they may not be contacted about it until the middle of February. The purpose is to start a national dialog on the importance of transparency in government.

Earth Day

Saturday, April 22nd, is Earth Day; a good time for Local Leagues to do something good for our Mother Earth and get their names in the paper while they're at it. Never pass up an opportunity to recruit new members and there are a lot of people out there interested in the environment – particularly now.



