

**League of Women Voters of Mountain Lakes**  
**Citizens' Involvement in Government Consensus**  
**April 2006**

A core mission of the League of Women Voters of Mountain Lakes is the promotion of citizens' participation in government. In support of this mission, this study addressed how to encourage citizens to run for local elected office as well as volunteer to serve on school and borough committees and commissions. The study identified four critical areas for successful promotion of elected or appointed positions:

1. a formal system of "asking" qualified candidates to run
2. increased resident involvement in committees
3. comprehensive dissemination of information
4. making elected positions attractive to potential candidates

The League strongly supports all efforts toward more resident involvement in these four areas. Specific suggestions from the consensus meetings are:

**Formal "Ask" System:**

The League recognizes the important part played in the recruitment of candidates for office by the political parties and by the Citizens Search Committee (CSC). Although non-partisan alternative structures for Borough government were studied, on balance the League supports the current form of Borough government in large part because the parties recruit and support candidates. The support given to candidates in NJ election administration and filing procedures is valued, and the League encourages the CSC to consider providing similar support to Board of Education candidates.

The League is concerned about the current structure/status/operation of the CSC. The League strongly recommends revitalizing the CSC by returning to the original structure, in particular, participation on the CSC by representatives from local organizations. The League believes this is the most effective way to identify potential candidates.

The League disagrees with the part of the 1984 League position that excluded all League members' participation on the CSC. The League believes its members should not be excluded from serving on the CSC. To this end, the League should review the

1984 position to see if there are any other suggested updates to be voted on by the membership at the May 2007 annual meeting.

The League acknowledges it needs to play a role in organizing and supporting the CSC. An off-board League member should be appointed as liaison to the CSC and coordinator of the local organizations. It was also suggested that the League president publicize the CSC at Board of Education Grants Action Committee meetings, where members of many local organizations are present.

### **Committee Involvement:**

The League strongly supports the use of Borough and Board of Education committees as a training ground for future elected officials. Committees are an excellent way for residents to better understand the issues and gain experience and skills for holding elected office. The League also feels residents will gain confidence and be less intimidated to run for office.

The League recommends clearly defining the committee missions and the roles of citizens on the committees, both for Board of Education and Borough Council. Recommendations of citizen committees should be respected and utilized to prevent disillusionment or burnout.

The League recommends the Board of Education increase the number of committees with residents. Participation is essential to increasing resident interest in education-related issues and to decreasing the steep learning curve for Board of Education members. The League feels that having more residents on committees strengthens the Board of Education with the residents' expertise or willingness to research issues, improving the quality of decision making. The committee support could also lessen some of the work load of Board members.

Asking residents who have interests or skills in the committee areas is an important way to recruit residents. Other suggestions include publicizing committee openings through a "volunteer job fair," the websites, and in the Home and School Bulletin.

### **Dissemination of Information:**

Residents informed on the issues are more likely to get involved and/or run for elected office. Good communication on the issues also reduces the perception of secrecy and lack of "sunshine." The League recommends that the Board of Education and Borough Council increase issue-related information provided to the residents by publicizing upcoming agendas and posting timely and up-to-date meeting minutes on the websites (including not only the Board of Education and Borough Council, but the respective committee minutes as well). The League also suggests pursuing the broadcasting of Board of Education and Borough Council meetings on cable television (to be considered in future cable negotiations).

The League also acknowledges our own mission to inform residents about issues. The League should resume publication of the monthly summary of "Observer Corps" reports in the Home and School Bulletin, including summaries of both Borough Council (previously done as the "Borough Dispatch") AND Board of Education meetings.

### **Making Seat More Attractive:**

The League survey, which was conducted as part of the study, indicated that time commitment is one of the biggest deterrents to serving in an elected position. The League supports efforts by the Borough Council and Board of Education to reduce the workload of their members. The League encourages both governing bodies to consider increasing resident participation on committees as a possible aid in reducing the time commitment of elected officials.

In addition, the League urges current elected officials to emphasize to potential candidates the positive, fulfilling rewards of serving in office. As contested elections were mentioned as another deterrent to running, those recruiting should emphasize to potential candidates that contested elections benefit the community by broadening the range of issues addressed by the candidates and are essential to a fully functioning democracy.