

Comments of the League of women Voters of Sussex County on the Proposed Council Redistricting Plan

October 25, 2011

The League of Women Voters commends the County for providing the opportunity for public input in the 2011 redistricting process – for the first time in history. This is a significant step in the right direction.

Our disappointment comes in the missed opportunity to reflect communities of interest in this process that occurs only once every ten years.

There are an infinite number of ways to draw lines in any redistricting process. What is critical is to identify, in advance, the criteria – or “goals” – to be used in judging the most appropriate maps. The League undertook a major study of redistricting principles and practices beginning in late 2010. Following background research, the first step in that process was to develop criteria that supplemented the legal requirements. It took five drafts before we were satisfied that our criteria were appropriate. The most important of those criteria was that of recognizing “communities of interest.”

Communities of interest comprise groups of people living in an area that have similar interests. Similar interests are especially important to prevent fracturing groups across districts in a manner that dilutes their voting strength. Communities of interest can be based on race or ethnicity, age, or on other factors such as rural/farm related or manufactured home communities. They may be based on social and economic interests such as media markets, culture, or jobs.

The concept of communities of interest is widely used throughout democratic nations and is highly regarded by judges in any litigation over redistricting plans.

The League then made presentations on the redistricting process in three public forums and 9 additional civic groups and sought suggestions for perceived communities of interest at each forum. We then developed 12 variations of maps and recommended one that protected all the communities of interest identified in our meetings with members of the public. It also left each incumbent Council member in a separate district.

The concept of communities of interest appeared to be considered as possible input, though not by name, by Mr. Moore in his presentation of the proposed process at the June 28 Council meeting. However, the recommended map and report presented to Council on August 9 seemed to equate this concept with municipalities. We were pleased that the proposed map does protect municipal boundaries. However, municipal boundaries are not the same as communities of interest.

The proposed map was based on different criteria, with different results than the League’s recommended map. The key criteria used in developing the map proposed by Mr. Moore included:

- “Change council districts as little as possible”,
- “Do not ‘undo’ what voters have chosen”, and
- “Avoid placing current Council members within the same district.”

The proposed map does protect the Long Neck community and the Georgetown area and does not split any municipalities. But, by changing districts as little as possible, the map ignored such

significant communities of interest as the Cape Region and the “Quiet Resorts.” Instead, it retained District 5 that spreads from the beach communities – South Bethany south to Fenwick Island and west to the Maryland line. It split the Cape Region so that the Lewes area remains in one district while the rest of the Cape Region – Rehoboth and Dewey Beach down to Bethany Beach remain in a separate district – further separating Bethany Beach from South Bethany.

We believe Council should have compared the map developed by the League of Women Voters with that presented by Mr. Moore and choose the one that best reflects communities of interest. The League map does change current Council Districts more than Mr. Moore’s map that was drawn to protect incumbents in 2001, most of whom are no longer on Council. But our map did place each incumbent Council member in a separate district.

As a separate issue, it is unclear how the goals/criteria of the proposed map were developed and adopted. These goals were the most critical aspect of the entire process. *They determined the outcome.* They deserved to be discussed fully in a public Council meeting. We believe they were never discussed in public. If more than two Council members had any input into these goals, the Delaware Freedom of Information Act would require that they be discussed in public.