

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF THE FAIRFAX AREA

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Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman and members of the Board of Supervisors.

I am Sherry Zachry, President of the League of Women Voters of the Fairfax Area. I speak on behalf of the League membership in Fairfax County.

The League understands what a difficult budget year this has become, and we commend you for the extraordinary efforts that you have made to seek citizen input before making your decisions. We especially thank the supervisors who are working to preserve the penny for affordable housing. Finding decent affordable housing in Fairfax County continues to be a problem for so many low-income families and individuals and the foreclosure crisis has only made this problem worse. We know you are facing pressure to reduce the “penny allotment” but we implore you to resist that temptation. If the penny is halved, you are essentially dropping the program since one half of the penny is currently allocated for debt on housing already purchased.

We commend the county staff and the Board for proposing increases in user fees for a wide range of county services, including re-imposition of the automobile “decal” fee. Especially now in tough budget times, it is appropriate to increase fees for those who can afford to pay them

Although we have many concerns about proposed cuts to services and personnel, we realize that some cuts are inevitable. And we would like to point out that whether the proposal is to cut staff or to cut programs, or both, the result will be the same to the citizens of Fairfax County since a needed service – something that is important to our quality of life – will no longer be available. The following are some of the League’s most pressing issues.

- Over the years, the County has taken steps to protect the most vulnerable citizens by providing funding and staffing for human services. We hope that this continues, even in the current budget climate, and would like to point out that administrative cuts in the Human Services Department results in reduced “human services.” Unfortunately, there are reductions across many departments and programs offered by the County.
- We oppose the proposed cuts in services for senior citizens that limit senior transportation and close some senior centers. We are very concerned about budget cuts that affect the County’s growing aging population. According to a League study in the County, our aging members are most alarmed about the cuts in transportation, a service that allows them to remain in their own homes in spite of not being able to drive for groceries and doctor’ appointments. In fact, our members were hoping that senior transportation services would be increased since the current income threshold leads to hardships and outrageous taxi service expense.
- The proposed elimination of the Supervised Visitation and Exchange Center—which serves to protect vulnerable women and children in situations of uncooperative or potentially violent exchanges of child custody is very troubling to the League. We remember that the Board of Supervisors played an important role in the initiation of this program which was deemed to be a significant step in allowing families to interact with one another in a “safe environment.” In our opinion, none of the proposals offered for replacement services are satisfactory.
- Other concerns are cuts to services for young children, such as Head Start and subsidized child-care, and cuts to the victims of crime through reductions in staffing for the Victims Services Unit. Again, these proposals will affect some of the most vulnerable in our community, disadvantaged children and families, as well as victims of crime.

- Along that line, we think it is not very wise to decrease support for anti-gang and anti-drug initiatives by cutting funds for successful after-school activities in middle schools (in the Community and Recreation Services budget) and cutting the School Resource Officers Program (in the Police Dept. budget) in middle schools. I must point out news in last week's media that gang recruitment activity was thwarted at Franklin Middle School when students reported the incidents to resource officers at that school.

In the March 27, 2009 article in *The Washington Post*, Metro Section, which reported the arrests of seven Chantilly-area teenagers, ages 13 and 16, it was county officials who said: "the episode serves as a reminder that middle school-age youths are the most vulnerable to being lured down the path of delinquency, drugs and even violence." County officials further remarked that their anti-gang efforts are having a positive effect, noting that more than 70 percent of the county's seventh and eighth grade students attend after-school programs and those who attend the programs see sharply improved academic performance. Quoting the article further, "police report a 32 percent drop in youth gang activity from 2006 to 2008." Please, do not hinder that kind of progress.

- As we have stated in past years, the League believes that supplements for magistrates, the entry point to the courts and justice system in Virginia, are essential. The State's recent legislation requiring that magistrate salaries be the same across the Commonwealth, which is a low level for this area, and restricting future supplements will make it very difficult to staff these important public safety positions in Fairfax County. We understand that no newly hired magistrates will be able to receive supplements, but currently paid supplements are grandfathered. If the supplements are cut for those in the county who currently receive them, as is proposed in this budget, they cannot be reinstated in the future according to this legislation. It seems to us that cutting current supplements would inflict further hardship on the people filling these positions and ultimately on the citizens of the County who benefit from these services.
- The League has been concerned about the availability of mental health services in the Adult Detention Center (ADC) since it first studied the Fairfax jail 40 years ago. Since it appears impossible to keep persons with mental illnesses out of the jail and in more appropriate facilities or programs, we have supported bringing the services to those in the ADC who need them. Most recently, this has been the role of Community Services Board, which has provided forensic mental health and alcohol and drug services at the ADC. We are opposed, therefore, to the proposed 50 percent cut in these services, which were already stretched too thinly. They need to be increased, not decreased.
- Finally on a subject near and dear to our hearts—elections, the League is unhappy about the proposed cuts for in-person, absentee voting at satellite locations, along with proposals to decrease the number of election officers at the polls on election day. The satellite voting was very popular in the most recent general election and helped reduce some of the anticipated long lines at the polls in November. We believe that it is unrealistic to expect that citizens who live far from the Government Center will make the trip to vote absentee in person; therefore, voter turn out will likely be reduced. Or, the inability to conveniently vote absentee at satellite centers may produce longer lines at the polls which, when coupled with reduction of election officers, will make matters even worse.

Thank you for soliciting citizen input in the budget process and for listening so patiently to citizen concerns. We know that making these cuts is not very palatable for Supervisors, but that it is also a difficult year in which to raise taxes in order to prevent some of the cuts. It seems to us, though, that it is in the best interest of the county and its residents to vote the maximum advertised tax rate of \$1.05 to prevent the most serious cuts in staff and services.

Thank you,

Sherry W. Zachry
President LWVFA