

## **League of Women Voters Observer Corps Has Appetite for Law Recipes**

**By Denny Finneran**

**Chair of the Saratoga County League of Women Voters Observer Corps**

German statesman Otto von Bismarck said that “Those who love law and sausages should not see either being made.”

There has never been a consensus of the Saratoga County League of Women Voters on sausage making, however the local league, like its counterparts across the country, has a special appetite for the ingredients of how laws are made.

The LWV Observer Corps, members who volunteer to attend committee and general meetings of the Saratoga County Supervisors, regularly take note of how the county’s more than 230 million-dollar business is conducted with tax payer funds.

Many of the other League programs to promote participation in good government, such as LeaderSpark for teens, Take Me to Vote for fifth graders, voter registration, including First Vote for high school seniors, public Meet the Candidates forums, and educational programs such as those held recently on the Sunshine or open meeting laws, the pros and cons of nuclear power’s impact in the state, national health care, gun control, immigration, the movement for the national popular vote, the problems of uncounted votes across the country and lobbying for government campaign finance reform and against touch screen voting are all better known than the Observer Corps. And that is mostly by design.

The LVW observers are described in league literature as “the eyes and ears” of the League. You will notice immediately I am certain that “mouth” was not included. Those of us who volunteer to be observers understand that we are there to learn how local government works. This is basic to effective league action at the community level. We do try to be on the lookout for pieces of legislation or county government practice which may lead to further league study or action. Currently for example, the league is conducting an in-depth study of county government.

However, as observers we do not voice our personal opinion on legislation under discussion. We may and often do talk to the supervisors outside of the meeting and to the clerk and/or deputy clerk for the supervisors in order to clarify the action being taken at the meeting.

As LWV observers we agree to attend one or more of the dozen county supervisor committee meetings, most of which meet monthly. Out of courtesy, we make ourselves known to the chairperson of the committee and sign the attendance sheet if one is provided. Often the chairperson or a fulltime staff person provides those attending with an agenda at the time of the meeting. Other background information on the items under discussion is also available as a rule after the meeting. We, of course, take notes and fill

out a form which includes sections on the names of those supervisors in attendance, the major agenda items under discussion, whether or not the discussion was full and adequate. If the committee goes into executive session, the observer is to note if adequate notice was given, the reason given for the session closed to the public and whether or not the meeting resumed after the executive session.

Observers are also assigned to cover the Agenda Committee-a committee of the whole body of supervisors which lays the framework for the general board meeting usually held the following week. The same criteria used for observing the committee meetings are used for the general sessions. Observers watch for any unresolved issues that may need to be followed up or which may have a special interest to the LWV membership, for example any issue which the LWV has already studied and arrived at a consensus position.

Special attention is also paid at all committee and general board meetings to whether or not time is allotted for visitors to speak on specific issues. Any interested person may ask to speak for five minutes on an issue provided 24 hour notice has been given to the committee or board chairpersons.

One of the frustrations for observers is that the agenda containing the topics under discussion is not distributed even to the committee members until the day of the meeting, making it difficult if not impossible for interested citizens to prepare public comments and meet the deadline for asking for permission to speak at the meeting. Of course, permission to speak can also be denied even if the deadline is met. It seems to observers that this defeats the spirit of the sunshine or open meeting laws if not the letter of the law.

LWV observers are not exercising any special privilege by attending and reporting on the county supervisor sessions. Any citizen, due to the state's open meeting law has the same right. The state law ensures "the rights of all citizens to have advance notice of and to attend all meetings of public bodies at which any business affecting the public is discussed or acted upon, with certain limited exceptions to protect the public interest and preserve personal privacy."

League Observer Corps members exercise this right as one of the ways in which the LWV promotes participation in government. Anyone who wishes to learn more about the League and the Observer Corps may write to the LWV of Saratoga County, PO Box 1029, Saratoga Springs, 12866 or visit [www.lwvsaratoga.org](http://www.lwvsaratoga.org).