

La Crosse Wisconsin Voter

No. 70

League of Women Voters of the La Crosse Area Newsletter

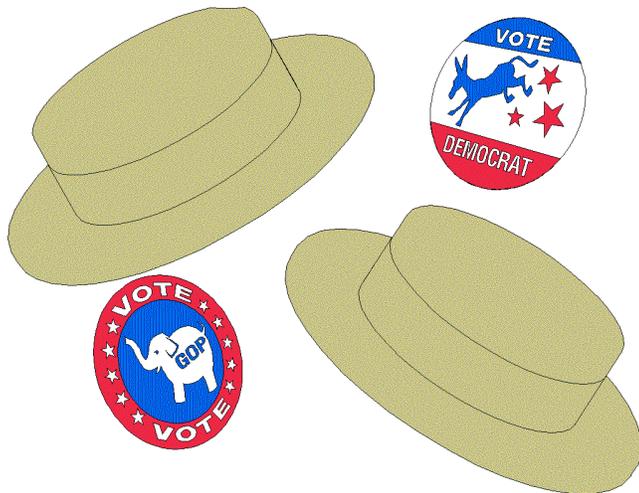
Dec. 2003

The President's Podium

WORLD WIDE FEDERATION WRESTLING AND LEAGUE

Our national office has produced a Public Service Announcement integrating voting and wrestling. The goal is to increase the participation of the young voter. If you want to preview the announcement you can go to www.smackdownthevote.com and view it via your computer if you have the right player on your computer. I will be looking for a League Member to take the beta tape around to the local stations so we can get some good show times (not 3:00 AM). If you are interested and like to talk with the local station PSA coordinators, please give me a call, and I will get the tape to you.

Our League Board is working well together, and we look forward to having some new faces at our Board Meetings. Rosalie Hooper-Thomas and "the two Ellen's" (Frantz and Rosborough) will be working on the slate of officers for the May Annual Meeting. They also have the task of filling some of the existing openings on the Board. Please consider saying "yes" when they call or better yet, call Rosalie and offer your services. "Do not ask what League can do for you, ask what you can do for League." Did I take that from someone well known? The Board meets on the third Wednesday of the month from noon-1:00 PM. Effective Leagues have Board members who find other members to help them on specific projects.



As you may know, our loyal League Member, Jean Marck, has been under the weather. She has never been a pain in the back to us but her back is dickering with her. She has persevered and has continued to run the program responsibilities from her launch pad. Thank you for your dedication, Jean. We look forward to seeing you at the next meeting.

The name of our "get out the vote" effort is a combination of the two top vote getters and was suggested by one of our League members, Margaret Larson.

BE PATRIOTIC- VOTE!

**Congressman Ron Kind
Thursday, December 11, 2003
Doc Powells, 200 Main St.**

**11:30 Buffet Lunch • Noon meeting
\$5.95 plus tax and gratuity**

Rep. Kind will specifically address the provisions of the Patriot Act as well as other current topics.

Reservations by Dec. 7 to Jean Marck, 788-4162 or jeanm2332@aol.com

If Congress doesn't adjourn by December 11, we will reschedule the meeting.

Thank you, Margaret.

It will look great on some of the billboards in our area. Our Voters Service Chair, Catherine Kolkmeier, will keep you posted on the upcoming events.

I can't stop myself; I have to sign off saying....

Votingly Yours,

Kay Adams
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Gearing Up for the Election Year

By Catherine Kolkmeier

While everyone else is getting ready for the holidays, we are getting ready for another election year. And this means we need your help!

Whether you'd like to help out at an event, do occasional office work (like making phone calls or stuffing envelopes), or get involved in planning, we will have a job for you. Starting this winter, we will be holding several educational events to help people register to vote and learn more about the upcoming elections. We already have plans for two candidate forums! In addition, we will be sending out letters to raise funds for our new *Be Patriotic—Vote!* Campaign. And as the fall elections get closer, we will be doing some advertising so we can get as many voters to the polls as possible.

All of these efforts are going to need helpers, and we will have projects to fit any schedule or skill level. To volunteer for just an hour, a day, or a whole event, or if you have an idea for an event, please call Catherine Kolkmeier at (608) 796-9090 or send me an email at cathkolk@centurytel.net. As events get scheduled, we will be calling on you!

JEFF BLUSKE ON SMART GROWTH PLANNING

By Catherine Kolkmeier

Jeff Bluske, head of La Crosse County's Zoning, Planning and Land Information Department spoke to us at our October lunch meeting about the County's Comprehensive Plan.

La Crosse County contains 12 townships, all with different services and different needs. Many are very rural—and many want to stay that way. Others border on the cities of La Crosse and Onalaska, and development is spreading over the boundaries into what was once rural land. This situation leads to problems with property rights, worries about growth and development, and numerous environmental concerns. In La Crosse County, the minimum size for a farm is 35 acres, and many farms of all sizes are dying, causing them to be split up into housing sites and smaller lots. A lack of crop rotation on smaller



parcels results in erosion problems, which affect the health of nearby streams. Residents of homes built on the fringe of farmlands complain

about farm smells and sounds. It was for these reasons that in 2000, the County wrote and is now implementing its Comprehensive Plan, which provides a 20-year vision for growth and land use in the County.

The plan was written in response to Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning and "Smart Growth" law of 1999 mandating county planning, and it is intended to serve as a guide for the future growth of all townships, with each one having a say. The law's intent was to provide consistency between counties and allow for more public participation in the planning process.

Because the County cannot mandate what each township does with its land, the effort had to be cooperative and keep everyone's needs in mind. The concept of a Comprehensive Plan was introduced to each township individually, and it was not an easy process. One must keep in mind, Bluske says, that most town governments are composed of part-time volunteers, and many are accustomed to dealing with problems as they arise, not laying out long-term plans that involve surrounding areas. But the towns rose to the occasion, each one forming a planning committee. Meeting every two weeks, the committees sent out surveys to their residents and reviewed their needs for schools, roads, and other services. They considered the effects of their growth on neighboring towns—school bus use, speed limits, drainage, road quality, and subdivisions. Recognizing the many interrelationships and ramifications of growth on an area is no small task, and the experience of considering them was eye-opening for many town residents.

The results of each town committee's work was brought together into a Comprehensive Plan for the County in 2000. Bluske was proud to report that this "2020 Plan" is being *used*, not languishing on a shelf

as many plans often do. It is comprised of many goals and objectives in each of nine categories:

1. Economic development
2. Water supply
3. Sewer service
4. Transportation
5. Solid waste
6. Land use and growth management
7. Parks, recreation, and environment
8. Air quality
9. Water quality

For each category, the Plan goes into detail describing the goals and the objectives for meeting them, and making recommendations for satisfying those objectives. The 2020 Plan, as it is written now, has been approved by the State of Wisconsin until 2010. It serves not only as a guide for a county that grows at a rate of 1000 people a year, but it is also proof that the County's towns can work together—something that will be crucial when the County seeks funds for preparing an updated version.

Affordable Housing

November 13, 2003 Meeting

By Maureen L. Kinney

Diane Dunlap from Couleecap (<http://www.couleecap.org/>), housing program specialist, talked to us about housing needs in the City and County of La Crosse. Diane had previously served as a bank loan officer. In that capacity she saw a lot of need for affordable housing and housing assistance. In her job she now helps people of low income to purchase a home and to secure down payment assistance through a number of grant programs.

She indicated that many people tell her that La Crosse County does not have a housing problem. She related that in the most recent census, the county number showed there were 10,841 people living at or below the poverty level. Poverty level is extremely low, a family of two has \$12,200 of income or less, and a family of four \$18,400. Twenty-seven percent of these families are female-headed. The basic guideline for housing costs is that a family should not spend more than 30% of its gross income for housing. She noted that in La Crosse our housing stock is quite old and in need of repair. She also noted that the rental vacancy rate in La Crosse is one

percent, extremely low, probably not much more than having an apartment empty for a short period of time as there is turnover in tenancy. Also, much of La Crosse's rental units are for students, not families.

Diane walked us through a real case scenario. She said if one buys an \$80,000 house (not too many of those around), the mortgage would be about \$72,000, which means that the house payment, taxes and insurance would be \$707 per month. She walked us through some reasonable budgets. An individual would need to earn \$13.50 to gross enough to support the \$707 monthly housing payment if it was 30% of the gross income. Looking at the reasonable budget she prepared, the family was still in the hole almost \$200 a month in meeting their other basic needs, excluding any costs for childcare. Diane also noted that with the low interest rates, the property values were rising.

She noted that the City of La Crosse has been taking down some of the worst homes and infilling or replacing these homes through programs in conjunction with WWTC. The labor costs therefore were quite reasonable, but the actual building costs have been going up. This year those houses sold for \$105,000, and last year they had been \$99,000. Still a very good deal for what the house provides, but not affordable for people at poverty level. She said those homes were at the upper end of the income levels that CAP is set up to serve.

She also noted that in rehabbing older homes, HUD has set up certain standards, which are certainly reasonable in addressing health and safety. However, she noted how much those standards increase the cost of rehab. HUD wants the houses to be lead free. To replace windows in a lead free manner, the cost of window replacement increases from \$200 a window to \$450 a window but really does not increase the value of the house. A rule-of-thumb in housing rehab is that the value of the house is only increased by 50% of the cost of rehab. Therefore, the homeowner can end up with a significant loan and not enough increased equity to cover the loan if the house is sold. The City of La Crosse has a low interest loan program for housing rehab.

Diane noted that in the last three months in the 4-county area where she works, there were 219 requests for housing from homeless families, and 51 units available. The families are allowed to remain in these homes for up to two years so there is not rapid turnover.

Diane noted that since 1995, CAP has put 300 families into owner-occupied homes within La Crosse County. She noted that the average rehab loan for housing is \$15,000.

As with many issues, there are competing values that don't always mesh. The City of La Crosse would like to have its homes rehabbed and improve the housing stock. However, rehab does not increase the homeowner's equity in the same proportion as the cost of the rehab. Homes are not really affordable for the very poor. Homes for the very poor may not be a realistic goal for everyone. Therefore, we need to have a mixed offering of both homes and apartments for families.

Reproductive Health Legislation

By Janet Kusch

The good news is we got through the first floor period without the harmful legislation coming to the floor. However, depending on the bill, hearings will continue through December. Then when the floor period begins in January the potential for scheduling votes will begin again.

AB 383/SB 186 Repeal of the Family Planning Waiver. Scheduled for floor debate and vote on 9/23/03, whereas it was sent to the Assembly Family Law committee and Senate Health committee. Joint hearing held on 10/14/03. AB 634 was introduced with the same repeal language but with an implementation of the repeal to be June 2004. There was an attempt to get this to the floor without a hearing, but it didn't happen. It will be important to watch.

SB 27 allows physicians to deny prenatal care and tests to pregnant women. It is essential for women to have access to all pertinent information to make informed decisions about their health and the health of their pregnancy. This bill puts women's health and lives in jeopardy. A woman is left with no legal remedy if she is harmed by a physician's negligence. This bill violates best practices established by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. The hearing was held 10/28/03 was passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

SB 28 Baby abandonment counseling. Expands state-mandated lecture on abortion to include information

about immunity from liability for baby abandonment within 72 hours after birth. Mandates that abortion providers dispense legal information. Promotes baby abandonment as a pregnancy option in a state-mandated lecture. Hearing held 10/28/03 and Passed out of Senate Judiciary Committee.

AB 63/SB 21 Denial of birth control by pharmacists. Allows pharmacists to refuse to fill any prescription if they personally believe that it may be used for abortions or that may cause the death of a person. Protects pharmacist from being fired. SB 21 is now in Senate Organization committee for scheduling for floor debate and vote. AB 63 is now in Assembly Organization committee for scheduling for floor debate and vote.

AB 67 Denial of Health Care Bill ("Health care providers' Conscience Clause"). Allows health care workers and pharmacists to refuse to provide health care services based upon a moral or religious belief, including denying medical treatment if it is not related to the "beneficial treatment of a developing child." Advanced directives and powers of attorney for health care can be ignored. Doctor/worker can't be fired or sued by patient harmed by refusal. Hearing held in Senate Health on 10/7/03. Executive session will be held in the near future, with bill coming to Senate floor possibly in November.

Contraceptive Equity

Good news!!! Legislating contraceptive equity has been a long standing struggle. The legislative struggle is over!!! On October 17, 2003, Attorney General Peg Lautenschlager issued an informal legal opinion concluding that the exclusion of contraceptives from an employer sponsored program that otherwise provides prescription drug coverage violates the Wisconsin Fair Employment Act (WFEA). The WFEA prohibits sex discrimination in employment, including in employee benefits.

Some important points validating the need for insurance coverage for contraception and refuting concerns that Health Insurance costs will increase:

- In a 2001 study done by the Wisconsin Insurance commissioner, only 22% of insurance plans examined covered the FDA approved forms of contraceptives. Less than one-half of those surveyed covered birth control pills.

- According to a 2001 Kaiser Family Foundation survey, 41% of employees have coverage of all reversible contraceptives. In contrast, 98% had coverage of prescription drugs.
- According to the Women's Research and Education Institute, women typically spend 68% more in out of pocket health care costs than men.
- The estimated cost to private-sector employers of providing contraceptive coverage is extremely low:

A 1998 report by the Alan Guttmacher Institute suggests that the average total cost of adding coverage for the full range of prescription contraceptives to health plans that do not currently cover them would be \$21.40 per employee per year. The added cost to employers is \$1.43 per employee per month. This estimate does not take into account potential cost savings which results from covering contraceptives.

- Experience with the Federal Employee's Health Benefit Package—the largest employer-based health plan in the world—confirms that contraceptive coverage does not affect employer premiums. In 2001, the Office of Personnel Management, which runs the program, reported that there was no need to increase premiums since there was no cost increase due to contraceptive coverage.
- By reducing the direct and indirect costs associated with unintended pregnancy, insurers save money by offering contraceptive coverage (William M. Mercer group and Washington business Group on Health):
 - In 1993, the average cost of the birth of a baby was \$10,000. The average cost of oral contraceptives was \$300-\$350 per year.
 - Indirect cost savings to employers come from reducing the incidence of expensive premature births among employees and dependents, employee absences, maternity leaves, pregnancy-related sick leaves and employee replacement costs.

- A study done by the Mercer group concludes that employers can save as much as \$4.40 for each dollar they spend on contraceptive coverage. They concluded the cost of not providing contraceptive coverage is 17% higher than offering it.
- Increased access to contraceptives prevents abortion. The United States has the highest unintended pregnancy rate in the western world. According to the Centers for Disease control and Prevention, 50% of pregnancies are unintended and nearly half of those result in abortion.
- Babies who are born as a result of unintended pregnancies have lower birth weights and have higher rates of infant mortality. A woman who becomes pregnant unintentionally is less likely to seek prenatal care and is more likely to engage in unhealthy activities.



League of Women Voters of the La Crosse Area:

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La Crosse County web site (information on Board of Supervisors and Committees):

<http://www.co.la-crosse.wi.us/Default.htm>

State Legislative Hotline:

(800) 362-9472

Wisconsin State Legislature (including *Wisconsin Blue Book*):

<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/>

League of Women Voters of Wisconsin:

<http://www.lwvwi.org/>

League of Women Voters (National):

<http://www.lwv.org/>

Calendar for December 2003

League of Women Voters of the La Crosse Area

Rep. Ron Kind

Doc Powell's, 200 Main St.
(Details inside)

Thurs., Dec. 11 at noon

Board Meeting

Doc Powell's, 200 Main St.

Wed., Dec. 17 at noon

Looking ahead to 2004:

Wisconsin Presidential Primary

Feb. 17, 2004

Legislative Breakfast

March 20, 2004

Note: Board meeting times/location are subject to change; refer to agenda or contact LWV President.



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