

NH Voter, the newsletter of the League of Women Voters New Hampshire.

December 2020

As this year that has thrown all of us off kilter comes to a close, the League of Women Voters NH board wishes you the best holidays you can muster and a much better New Year. In that spirit, we look ahead to some of the things that will concern League members and friends in 2021.

NH State Legislature

At this writing, it is unclear how the NH House and Senate will conduct business when the 2021 legislative session is set to start in January. There has been talk of postponing Senate hearings on proposed bills until February and/or using online formats such as zoom. Also being discussed by Senate leadership is combining bills, as was done in spring 2020 when hearings could not be held and only one big voting session was held. These “omnibus” bills would streamline the process and reduce the number of hearings to be scheduled, but it would also mean that a bill is likely to have good parts and bad parts. This creates a dilemma for legislators in terms of how they should vote on a bill.

The 400 members House is faced with the problem of having to meet off-site for voting sessions in order to socially distance. Last year they met at the arena at UNH in June. But what about hearings for bills? The state does not have video-audio set ups in each room in the State House and the Legislative Office Building; how will it be possible for cautious legislators and the public to attend hearings and to testify with Covid still a threat?

When we learn more, we’ll let you know.

State Issues. At this time all we have are titles of bills that have been proposed, no text. But based on the titles, here are some major things we expect:

The League’s priority is protecting **voting rights**, and at last count at least 70 election law bills had been proposed for the House. Senate list not complete yet. We will follow them somehow. We will support another **independent redistricting commission** bill.. But likely it won’t pass in time for the Legislature to do its required redistricting work following the census results. Thus we are advocating for improved transparency, public access and comment opportunities (including remote access) when they begin their work.

Crafting the **biennial budget** will be the big challenge for the Legislature. By law it must be a balanced budget (unlike the federal budget). With business revenues and taxes down, it will require prioritizing.

Funding of public education will be a major issue. The current formula for state funding for public schools is being challenged in court...again. You all know the pressure is on local property taxes to fund schools. That creates disparities among communities with strong tax bases versus communities with only residential tax payers. The Commission to Study School Funding issued its recommendations this month. What the Legislature will do with those recommendations is to be seen. For more on this topic, including a link to the report and some articles about it, visit our LWVNH.org Studies page.

<http://lwvnh.org/studies/>

Other NH issues to be addressed by legislation in 2021:

Restrictions on reproductive rights are being raised in several bills this year. **Firearms** legislation (already the NH House voted at their organizational meeting on Dec. 2 to allow firearms in the State House and LOB, overturning the restrictions on that passed two years ago.) Addressing the growing

problems of **homelessness** and **lack of affordable housing** will be part of the budget discussion but likely other legislation too.

How has the make-up of the NH Legislature changed? The 2020 election flipped both bodies from Democrat to Republican control. The Senate will now be 14-10 Republican (Senate president will be Chuck Morse). The House (new speaker is Dick Hinch) comprises 213 Republicans to 187 Democrats. The Executive Council had a major turnover, will now be 4 Republicans and one Democrat (who represents district 2, the heavily gerrymandered district created in 2011.) And Governor Sununu won his third term.

Before the November election, the make-up of the NH House was 230 Democrats, 157 Republicans, and 13 vacancies (one third of the members were women). The Senate was 14-10 Democrat, and the Executive Council was 3 to 2 Democrat.

Federal government:

Of course the news coverage of the election has been intense. New Hampshire, with our typical swing state behavior, returned our Democrat Senator and our two Democrat Representatives to Washington and voted for the Biden/Harris ticket (while voting to turn our state government Republican). We cast 814,499 ballots in New Hampshire (as of Nov. 19 count; count may go up when recount tallies are published).

Almost one-third were absentee ballots, which created a lot of work for poll workers and town clerks who handled it all beautifully. Thanks to revised and publicized rules about absentee voting, we had a record turnout and a smoothly run election in NH.

Next job for the Congress is to pass stimulus spending and Covid relief measures, then address healthcare. What else? We'll wait and see.

Nationally the **Presidential election** will be finalized soon. But as of today in online sources, here are the **vote tallies**: Biden/Harris received 51.3% = 81,284,062 votes and 306 electoral votes.

Trump/Pence received 46.9% = 74,221,849 votes and 232 electoral votes. Record turnout.

Local government:

For those of us who live in towns that hold town meeting and elections in March, the big question is whether we'll be able to vote absentee if we wish to avoid Covid exposure. No word yet on an extension of the absentee voting procedures. We'll keep you informed. Filing period for anyone running for town offices (assuming your election is on March 9, the traditional date) is Jan. 20-29. Visit or call your town clerk for the forms.

League membership renewals and dues:

If you are a new member in 2020 or if you have already paid your League dues in 2020, skip this section. If you are a "Life" member no dues are required.

For the rest of you...please renew your membership. We are an all-volunteer organization but we do have expenses, and \$32 of your dues supports our national League organization.

On November 3 we sent via US mail a dues notice to all our state members (members in the Kearsarge/Sunapee unit received theirs earlier in the year). If it's in your to-do pile, please dig it out, write a check and fill out the form and mail it. You'll make your state president and treasurer very happy the next time we visit the office so we don't have to do a second mailing. Or you can pay online with a credit card at our website. <http://lwvnh.org/membership-donations/> Dues are \$45 per year; \$55 for two people in the same household. Any amount over that will be a much appreciated donation.

Not sure whether you are paid up or not? Just send us an email and we'll check the list.
LWVNewHampshire@gmail.com

Upcoming League events:

We wish we could tell you 2021 will be back to normal...but we can't. We just don't know. There may be a New England League Leadership Conference in spring held virtually (last year's went well that way, even though we missed seeing you in person.) Local Leagues have held some board meetings virtually. Greater Nashua will resume monthly zoom meetings in January. Again, we'll let you know when we have actual events to tell you about.

Why we have public schools: an editorial. *The message below was written in response to a November email from Reaching Higher New Hampshire, which has been keeping the public updated about the Commission to Study School Funding. The Commission's final report was released December 2020. We expect legislation to be filed addressing at least some of the recommendations.*

LWVNH board member and education activist Janet Ward responded to Reaching Higher NH. Her response, with slight modifications, is printed below.

I read with interest the email from Reaching Higher NH regarding a Biden-selected Secretary of Education. What seriously troubles me is that Reaching Higher NH does not clearly explain the original inspiration for and purpose of public education in the United States. I think it would be helpful to begin any discussion of public education with a serious consideration of its original purpose as envisioned by early advocates like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

Thoughtful, reasonable discussion of public education should begin with that original inspiration and vision. I have thought long and hard about that founding impetus and I believe it remains sound and inspiring, though it has all too often become lost in the babble of competing views. Public schools were founded to prepare young people to become contributing citizens to our experiment in democracy. If young people are not properly prepared for their role in our democratic society, it will not survive.

Reaching Higher NH could play a significant role by pointing everyone who steps forward to speak about public education back to the historical and, I believe, essential reasons for the establishment of public schools: to ensure the survival of our nation as a democracy.

Our country is at a turning point. Will we adhere to its early and exciting promise contained in the first paragraph to the Constitution, which says that our nation was formed, among other stated reasons, to "promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity..."? If we do not instill an understanding and an appreciation for the reasons our nation was founded, our nation will not survive because no one can or will work to protect what he/she does not understand or appreciate. A key reality to which the Constitution speaks is that we are a "union." No matter what our individual beliefs or aspirations, as a nation there are some values that we share as one united nation, as a community. The underlying purpose and value of public education has been lost to many. It is time to focus on this historical reality.

Another perspective that needs to be respected is that the original mission of public education can take place in a myriad of formats to respond nimbly and well to the needs of 21st century society. However, no matter what the format—traditional classrooms, online, public charter schools, even home schooling that is required to adhere to public schools' curricular requirements—it must be understood that the role of the teacher is key to success. Americans must appreciate the need to provide a pathway for able, talented aspiring teachers to be superbly educated in their subject matter, provided a competitive wage, and supported in their essential work. The profession of teaching should be held up as the key to a sustainable democracy and to a successful nation – a nation which is not only economically successful but is a success because it recognizes and respects the value of each human being. Nowhere should this be more evident than in our public schools.