

“Do Appointed Public Bodies in Henderson County Encourage Citizen Participation/Democracy?”

Executive Summary

The Local League Study for 2010-11, “Do Appointed Public Bodies in Henderson County Encourage Citizen Participation/Democracy?” was launched in August 2010 when a committee met to formulate the criteria for the selection of the boards and advisory committees to be included in the survey, and to design the survey and consensus questions. The words “transparency” and “democracy” were uppermost in the minds of the study committee as it conducted its discussions and developed its criteria for survey questions.

The committee also sought agreement as to the process needed for collection of information from the many committee members, citizens attending sessions, and Board of Commissioners, and how best to digest and publish the findings. Letters outlining the process were sent initially to the BOC and Chairs of boards and committees chosen. Survey questions appropriate to each group were designed for individual committee members, interested citizens attending committee meetings and BOC. The LWVUS position under Representative Government (lwnvnc.org) states that a democracy depends upon informed, active participants at all levels of government, and that individual government bodies must protect the citizen’s right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, hold open meetings and make public records accessible. North Carolina Sunshine Laws, Freedom of Information Act, and the Henderson County Code of Ethics were resources League Committee members studied and discussed.

It was clear early on that League’s observer corps and other League members would be unable to observe all 48 appointed county boards and committees. A compromise was reached that narrowed the selection to a more manageable number of 20 which were then divided into 3 distinct categories that distilled results from credible cross sections of responses.

LWVHC Observer Corps and other League members participating in the survey process were divided into teams of two assigned to each selected board, distributing survey forms to members and citizens in attendance. Two of the twenty boards were dismissed from the collection of data because they no longer met or did not meet during the time interval in which the survey was completed. One hundred and four members of advisory boards responded as did fourteen citizens. All BOC responded.

Key findings in surveys revealed that Henderson County uses a consistent method in the appointing process and that a majority of citizens responding to the surveys were recognized by the committee chairs and were well received. It was not clear if agendas were published ahead of meetings for interested citizens nor if time was made for citizen comments on all the various board agendas. The application used for board appointments contains a summary of the Henderson County Code of Ethics. Reference to a website for the entire Code was not forthcoming.

In addition to the previously stated resources used by the League committee, another significant publication released in 2010 by the Institute of Government, UNCA, entitled “Creating and Maintaining Effective Local Government Citizen Advisory Committees” was extremely valuable. A more complete bibliography is listed in the complete study. The Appendix in the complete copy contains copies of each survey, survey results, a transparency summary, categories of the various committees/boards selected, and anecdotal comments from survey participants who chose to submit their observations.