

League of Women Voters of Henderson County Observer Team – Information and Best Practices

One major tenet of The League of Women Voters (LWV) mission is to foster informed and active participation of citizens in government. An active Observer Team helps keep members informed on the workings of government. An observer is an individual who attends governmental meetings and reports back to the League and the community on what happens there. Observers help promote government transparency and accountability.

Goals of the Observer Corps:

- Strengthen communication between LWVHC and local government agencies.
- Encourage individual members to become better informed regarding the decision-making process in local government.
- Follow community issues identifying problems and trends and share that information with members and the community.
- Encourage better government through observer presence at meetings.

As a group:

Decide on which meetings are the most important to attend and/or the meetings individual members are interested in attending taking in to account input from the LWVHC Board of Directors. Decide on the reporting form that will be used and the procedure for how reports will be filed. Plan an annual opportunity to report to members on the team activities.

Individual participants should:

Be good listeners.

Become familiar with the officials, functions, and operations of the agency being observed. Check to see if there may be an experienced League member you should contact who can lay the groundwork or give insight.

Become familiar with the programs and positions of LWV, LWVNC and LWVHC.

Become familiar with Roberts Rules of Order as they apply to a properly run meeting as well as the North Carolina Open Meeting Laws.

Be willing to report on the meeting observed in a timely manner.

Attend meetings as regularly as possible, arrive on time and stay through the entire meeting.

Procedures and what Observers watch for:

When you have decided to observe a meeting on a regular basis, please let the chair of the team know so that an introductory letter may be sent from the LWVHC board on your behalf.

If the agency has a website visit for general information about the members you will be observing as well as postings of minutes, agendas and meeting schedules. Arrive early and introduce yourself to the participants, ask for any copies of materials being discussed if available. Monitor both the issues discussed and procedures used in conducting the meeting.

Observations for your report should include type of meeting (regular, special, emergency).

Members who are present and members who are absent; staff present; media present; size and composition of audience

Items that are approved, disapproved, postponed or otherwise considered

Meeting facilities adequate – Is the room big enough for all who are there? Can the proceedings be heard?

Meeting procedure – Does the presiding officer have control of the meeting and follow protocol as established in Robert's Rules of Order? Is there adequate discussion of issues? Are visitors treated with respect and courtesy?

The main guideline to use in deciding if an issue is relevant to refer to the Board for consideration for League action: Is the issue relevant to LWV positions? The League is only able to take action on issues where a position exists.

For issues an observer feels members would appreciate knowing about so that they may take action as individual, be sure to make the appropriate comments on the reporting form so the information may get relayed to members through the reporting summary.

Distinction between Observing and Monitoring: Observing is a passive function. Monitoring implies action.

Observers listen and record facts reporting back to LWV, but usually does not comment at the meeting. Observers are permitted to seek clarification or information but are otherwise not to speak at meetings unless specifically instructed to do so by authority of the LWVHC Board of Directors.

Observers should not pursue personal interests or indicate support or opposition to an official action or a citizen participant's position.

Reporting Procedures:

A link for an online report through SurveyMonkey will be sent by email to you each month. The chair's goal will be to do a report summary for the online bulletin every two weeks to keep members informed. If something really URGENT comes up, the observer should contact the appropriate team leader or if unknown or the team doesn't exist, the observer should contact one or more members of the executive team (president/co-president/vice-president/secretary/treasurer).

Benefits to the LWVHC of an active observer corps:

Observers can alert leadership to issues important to the community to help shape areas of study or issues where a community forum can be developed. Observers reports can be summarized in the newsletter to keep members informed.

Other opportunities:

If meetings are televised a member who is not otherwise able to attend meetings could watch at home and submit observations gathered. While this does not provide the visibility of a presence at the actual meeting, it can still be very helpful in identifying issues important to LWVHC and the community.