



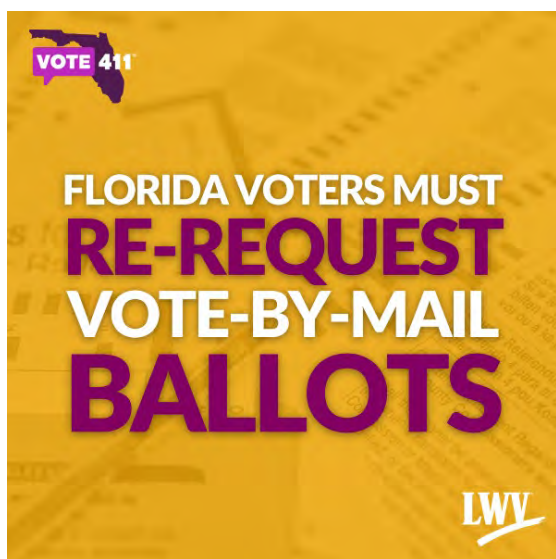
THE VOTER



The official newsletter of
the League of Women Voters
of North Pinellas County

<https://lwnorthpinellas.org> email: lwnpc.info@gmail.com
(727) 386-8525 | PO Box 7867, Clearwater, FL 33758

January-February 2023



Voting By Mail? Have you Reapplied ?

By Vivian Posey

If you or someone you know is planning to vote by mail in the upcoming municipal elections, here is an important question to ask: Did you **reapply** for a Vote by Mail ballot since the 2022 mid-term election? Because of the new laws passed by the Florida legislature in 2022, Vote by Mail ballots **MUST** now be requested for **every** election cycle.

If you don't remember checking that small box on your previous Vote by Mail ballot in 2022, or if you sealed your ballot before noticing that you would not be getting a Vote by Mail ballot without checking this small box, then do the following:

1. Go to VotePinellas.gov.
2. Click on Request a Mail-in Ballot.
3. Type in your information-name, date of birth, house number, Driver's License number or the last 4 digits of your social security number as your ID for this request.
4. Once your Voting record is located, you will be asked to verify the information, sign the request electronically, check that you are not a "robot," and hit SUBMIT.
5. You will receive an email confirmation that your request has been received and that it is in place for all elections through the next General Election or until 12/31/2024.
6. You can only request a Vote by Mail ballot for yourself and for **one other person** who is a family member or someone you are a legal guardian for.
7. Remember: this request will only last through the 2024 Presidential election. It will have to be renewed every two years, after EACH General Election.

If online reapplication is not your choice, you can also call the Supervisor of Elections main number (727)-464-8683 to reapply by phone, or you can go to the Supervisor of Elections office that is convenient for you to reapply!

Welcome 2023

From Our President: Marti's Musings



A Facebook post I recently received included a photo of six-year-old Ruby Bridges in 1960 entering William Frantz Elementary School. She was accompanied by several law officers for her protection since it was an all-white school in New Orleans, Louisiana and many people objected to the integration of schools required by the 1954 Supreme Court ruling (*Brown vs. Board of Education*). She was the first and only black child to attend that year. Some parents of the white students took their children out of the school and many teachers walked out as well. For the whole school year, Ruby Bridges was the only student in Barbara Henry's first grade class.

The Facebook post accompanying the photo said, "If this child was strong enough to survive it, your child is strong enough to learn about it."

There are additional interesting details of the story and I recommend you do a Google search for Ruby Bridges. Ruby also wrote about her first-grade experience in the book *Through My Eyes* (1999).

In the big picture about education in our country, let us always teach "honest history."

Martha (Marti) Folwell, President, LWVNPC

Florida Right to Clean and Healthy Waters

By Jacqueline Farrell

On February 15, 2023, Mr. Joseph Bonasia presented a Hot Topic "The



Joe Bonasia

Right to Clean Waters." The hot topic was co-sponsored by the LWVNPC and LWVSPA (Greater St. Petersburg area.). Also attending was Liz Lindsay, West Central Florida Deputy Coordinator, who contributed to this article. Mr. Bonasia is an environmental activist, the Chair of [Florida Rights of Nature Network](#) (FRONN) and Communications Director of [FloridaRightToCleanWater.org](#), the

The League of Women Voters of Florida has joined the campaign to get a constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2024 for civil action to enforce our right to clean and healthy waters in Florida, "The "Right to Clean and Healthy Waters" is a stopgap, declaring that "no more harm" will be campaign's mission is to take this

to Florida's voters; to educate them; to collect their petitions; and to ensure their voice is heard.

two organizations behind the campaign to amend our Florida Constitution with a fundamental "Right to Clean and Healthy Waters." During the presentation, Mr. Bonasia showed us some "inconvenient truths" about the state of our Florida waters. For example, recent reports indicate that Florida ranked first for the most acres of lake water too polluted for swimming or sustaining healthy aquatic life; polluted water has been a major factor in the death of manatees, and the frequency and duration of red tides have exploded. "Water is absolutely vital to the interests of all Floridians: our quality of life, our local economies, our health, and the wildlife that we cherish," -Bonasia said. Although there are clean

water standards according to environmental laws, state agencies have not always done their duty to protect the environment, too often representing politics and special interest groups. In a close to home example, Bonasia pointed out that with state environmental due diligence, the Piney Point incident that resulted in 215 gallons of polluted water being released into Tampa Bay could have been avoided.

The answer, Bonasia proposes, is to amend the Florida constitution to give Floridians a fundamental right to clean water, just as the United States Constitution gives citizens fundamental rights such as free speech, the right to bear arms, to vote, etc. This amendment would be “indefeasible” i.e., it cannot be annulled or altered by any government branch. Most importantly, if water quality is a fundamental right, a person, corporation, nonprofit or other entity could pursue legal action to hold Florida state agencies accountable if through action or inaction they do not protect our waters. For those who worry that the amendment would result in overuse of litigation, know that the amendment is not to seek monetary damages but corrective action.

In order to amend the state constitution, the Florida Supreme Court must review the wording, which they will do when approximately 223,000 registered Florida Voters sign petitions. By November 2023, a total of 892,000 Floridians must sign petitions in order for the proposed amendment to appear on the 2024 ballot.

What is necessary for this amendment to pass is people who are willing to educate others and to collect signatures. Locally, this is the League’s chance to protect our waters and effect positive change for our state. To learn more about the amendment and sign the petition, go to. <https://www.floridarighttocleanwater.org/> To assist with the campaign, contact liz.lindsay@floridarighttocleanwater.org



LWVNP is looking for leadership/and/or membership for the Natural Resources committee, which is currently unstaffed. Do you have an interest in the environment, clean water and air, energy conservation or preserving the planet? This may be an opportunity for you to further delve into an issue of your choice. You will have discretion as to what areas and projects you wish to explore. Assistance is available, and you can work as your time and schedule permit, with the exception of Board meetings which occur once monthly via Zoom. For more information, contact Marti Folwell at mhfolwell@verizon.net.

LWVNPC Members in Action

January 14, 2023 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemorative Breakfast Tarpon Springs, Florida

Jacqueline Farrell and Cathy Protopapas represented the LWVNPC for a breakfast filled with prayer, song and dance, native costumes, and a presentation by keynote speaker, Edie Darling, who in addition to being a LWVNPC member is a motivational speaker and pastor.



Cathy Protopapas & Jacqueline Farrell



Edie Darling



February 8, 2023 Indian Rocks Candidate Forum

On February 8, Indian Rocks Beach held a candidates' forum to introduce candidates running for the city commission. Bill Jonson opened with introductory remarks about the League, Tanya Landry served as moderator during a Q&A with the candidates, and Marti Folwell was timekeeper.



Tanya Landry, Bill Jonson, & Marti Folwell

Dunedin Hope Spot Event, February 11, 2023

The Florida Gulf Coast Hope Spot! Ocean exhibitors highlighted special waters during this eco-friendly event. A free, zero-waste community event, Hope Spot that is focused on sustainability, eliminating unnecessary plastics from our oceans, conserving wildlife. Beth Hovind and Cathy Protopapas volunteered to collect signatures for the Clean and Healthy Waters proposed amendment.



Letter to the Editor, Tampa Bay Times

Member Barbara Letvin submitted a Letter to the Editor of the Tampa Bay Times, which was published on February 20, 2022. She followed up on an article featured in the Times on diminishing seagrass in Tampa Bay waters and wrote in support of the Clean and Healthy Waters Amendment. Read it here;

Tampa Bay loses 12% of its seagrass in 2 years | Feb. 15

A right to clean water

The loss of 12% of our Tampa Bay sea grass reflects issues of water quality statewide. Increasing population and the building boom inflict fallout on our bay, springs and groundwater because of the permits granted, often ignoring science and common sense. The tons of pollutants pumped into Tampa Bay could have been avoided had the state Department of Environmental Protection heeded warnings of the Army Corps of Engineers. While individual and local efforts make a dent in reducing pollutants, we need another tool to address a statewide solution: an amendment to the state constitution to protect our rights to clean water. Unlike other amendments that the Legislature has circumvented, this one would not be dependent on them. Our health and well-being as a state depend on clean water.

Barbara Letvin, Trinity

There is still time to RSVP for the New Member Orientation!



New Member Orientation

Whether you've been a member for a few days or a few years, LWVNPC invites you to join us for our "new member orientation." We'll discuss how to best utilize your membership, who to contact, how to network, and much more.

Please join us on **Monday, March 6, 2023, at 5:30pm** for a Zoom orientation presentation on your League. We will present a PowerPoint "class" to give you a better picture of what the League of Women Voters of North Pinellas County does and how **YOU** fit in.

Please plan for a one-hour presentation to be followed by Q&A and suggestions you might have for how we can all work together in a more productive way.

We look forward to greeting you and spending a little time together. Don't miss this opportunity.

RSVP to nbslarson@gmail.com so we can send you the link and reminder for this meeting.



New Member
Justin Cahill

COMMITTEE UPDATES

Board Meeting - members welcome!



The LWVNP Board meets the 2nd Wednesday of each month at 4:00pm. Minutes for the January 2023 meeting can be found at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/103RaBDreStVtCiWofXD3FI04z2BXNhef/view?usp=sharing>

Please join us for any upcoming Board meeting to learn how you can participate more fully. Contact Gayla Larson (nblarson@gmail.com) to obtain the link to join these informative and busy meetings.

Economic Equity Committee



The Economic Equity committee is monitoring active healthcare issues in Florida that challenge access to equitable care and reproductive rights:

- To follow the work to put Medicaid Expansion on the ballot in Florida's 2024 election, sign up at <https://floridadecideshealthcare.org/get-involved/>. Everyone is encouraged to begin speaking with those whose signatures will be needed once the initiative is relaunched.
- The state League continues to support the coalition demanding reconsideration of the impending loss of Medicaid coverage to as many as 900,000 Floridians. When legislation in December disconnected continuous coverage from the Federal Public Health Emergency for Covid, the state could begin to reinstitute Florida's restrictive eligibility requirements. Current participants will receive a 45-day notice in a yellow-striped envelope of their redetermination date, beginning with those who have not used services for a year.
- A new physical form approved by the Florida High School Athletics Association removed controversial questions about athletes' menstrual histories, but FHSAA staff has quietly changed a question on the form requiring student athletes to report their "sex assigned at birth."

- Challenges to both the state’s current abortion law and possible new legislation are expected in the upcoming session. Preparation for speaking out on legislation is coordinated by Floridians for Reproductive Freedom. Get their newsletter for ongoing reports at <https://floridareprofreedom.org/join> and email amy@progressflorida.org for zoom updates.
- The state’s current law requires anyone under 18 to obtain parental consent for an abortion and requires young people without a supportive parent or guardian to seek a judicial waiver through a burdensome and highly arbitrary court process called ‘judicial bypass.’ Due to vague criteria in the current law, judicial bypass allows judges to make subjective decisions based on factors such as grades and demeanor while not considering fitness to raise a child or maturity to pursue a court process.)
- Details on the Governor’s budget, called “Framework for Freedom” recommended some conforming bills that would prevent covered entities (state supported) from any financial support for gender affirming healthcare, travel outside the state for services intended to support an abortion, or for services related to Diversity, Equity, or Inclusion (DEI) programming, including Critical Race Theory.

The Economic Equity Committee met and started to plan events locally around housing, renter’s issues, etc. with some ad hoc discussion on including consumer’s rights. The committee is looking for some additional input from others interested in collaborating/joining the committee. Email Mina Harkins, chairperson at mharkins@gis.net, text or call 443-536-3398.



Submitted by Vivian Posey, Education Chair

Committee members were asked to provide their observations of the November 8th midterm elections, both from a national and state level. Hailey Scheinman commented on the outstanding performance of youth voters (18-29), as the 2022 turnout was second only to that of the 2018 election. Other members commented on the way in which the election was conducted in Florida and that the integrity of the process in the state was upheld.

Update on the My Vote Counts project: In the absence of Laurie Meggesin, the committee discussed the steps they would like to take to move the project forward. These include resuming conversation with the Pinellas District Social Studies Specialist, regarding the Education Committee’s support for student-led voter registration events during spring 2023, continuing to research the voting habits and motivators for Gen Z adults, and conducting info sessions through the TSIC virtual mentoring sessions (Pinellas Education Foundation). Recommended reading: FIGHT: How Gen Z is Channeling their Fear and Passion to Save America, by John Della Volpe, (Director of Polling at the Harvard Kennedy Institute of Politics) was discussed.

Pinellas District School Board: A discussion was held regarding the need for League representation at School Board meetings and the meeting schedule for 2023 will be provided to members once it has been approved.



The Voter Services committee currently lacks a chairperson. Many events are coming up that require a chair or co-chair: municipal election forums, voter registration, coordination with the NAACP on the GOTV (Get out the Vote) project. If interested, contact Marti Folwell @ mhfolwell@verizon.net

Public Taxpayer Dollars and Private School Tuition: What's Happening with Education in Florida in 2023?

By Vivian Posey, Education Chair



What are school “vouchers” and why should Florida taxpayers be concerned about them?

A voucher program is a system that provides public taxpayer dollars to partially or fully fund the cost of private school tuition or other related expenses for qualifying students. It is not a new policy in Florida, having first been introduced more than 20 years ago (Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, 2002), nor is it in place only in Florida. (Florida is one of fifteen states in the US with a school voucher system but has one of the largest in the country). However, recently

filed legislation in the Florida House and Senate are poised to expand this system into one that is known as a “universal” system of school vouchers.

School vouchers are often termed “scholarships” and are promoted under the label of “School Choice,” by those who wish to conceal the practice of diverting funds from public to private educational institutions. School vouchers were originally designed by legislators to provide opportunities for students with disabilities or those with demonstrated economic challenges to transfer from their assigned public schools to private, often for-profit schools. In 2022, Florida implemented a system known as Education Savings Accounts, which became the vehicle for transferring these public funds directly to parents, rather than to the selected schools, to spend as they wish for education-related expenses

If the recently filed legislation in the Florida House and Senate (HB 1 and SB 202) passes during the 2023 legislative session, Florida’s system of school vouchers will be fundamentally and comprehensively expanded to one that is termed “universal.” This means that any student, even those who have never attended public school or are home-schooled, and do not have special needs or meet income criteria, will be eligible to receive thousands of dollars (est. \$7500-\$8000 annually) to spend as they choose for undefined education expenses.

The League of Women Voters of Florida has expressed strong opposition to this legislation that will vastly expand the transfer of public taxpayer funds to private, for-profit schools or directly to families of home-schooled students with no accountability or oversight.

At this time, no statement from the legislature has clarified the fiscal impact of this transfer of taxpayer funds away from public school districts. But estimates from the Education Law Center show there is potential for the program cost to jump from its current level of \$1.5 billion to around \$4 billion (2024-2025). According to Mary McKillup, "If new revenue is not found to cover these costs, public school districts will end up with significantly less revenue to fund the remaining public-school students, which we're estimating would be a drop in state aid per pupil of over \$900." Currently Florida ranks 41st (or 46th depending on the source) out of 50 in spending per K-12 pupil (2023).

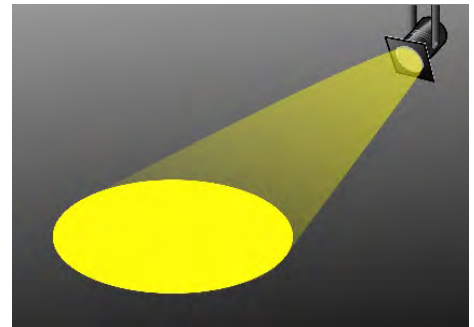
It is important that all Florida taxpayers have the facts about this proposed legislation that will impact their children and grandchildren's education. Having a thriving well-funded system of public education in Florida is not only a constitutional mandate, but it is the bedrock of a robust democracy!

Spotlight: Introducing Jeanne Reynolds

By Jacqueline Farrell



One delightful thing about being in the League of Women Voters is meeting new people and learning about their diverse and remarkable backgrounds. Jeanne Reynolds is such a person. Jeanne started out as a music educator for the public schools in Panama City and Pinellas County and served as Supervisor of Performing Arts for Pinellas County for 23 years. Along the way she became a leading advocate for arts education at the local and state level. At this time, she serves at the state level as the government relations/advocacy chair on the Florida Music Education Association board.



At LWVNP, Jeanne has been an active member of the Voter Services and Education committees. Along with advocacy, she counts public education as one of her passions, stating that "public education is a foundational part of democracy." During her tenure in Pinellas County, Jeanne is most proud of Pinellas County Schools' commitment to equitable access to arts education for all students, ensuring that all students receive instruction in music and art as part of a "complete" public school education. We know that instruction in the arts fosters a well-rounded student, and abilities that transfer to other fields of learning. She stresses that equitable access to education in the arts does not happen in every county statewide. As a founding member of the Pinellas Arts for a Complete Education Coalition, Jeanne and the coalition also advocate for a fair share of county referendum monies to be allocated for arts education.

Jeanne retired from Pinellas County Schools in 2020. In her new chapter, she is committed to getting young people to vote, and to educating all voters on the importance of voting and informed voting. She also plans to begin attending Pinellas County School Board meetings as a League Representative, which she considers vitally important given the turbulent issues in education at this time.

When not serving our League, Jeanne is an accomplished pianist, and loves to read, travel, and hike in our national parks.



Public Education in a foundational part of democracy.

Jeanne Reynolds

Viewpoint

What's happening to New College of Florida?

By Teresa Willatt

Since I grew up in Sarasota and remember when New College was built, I am alarmed at the news concerning changes to the school and public education in general.

A little history: New College was founded in the early 1960's as a private institution in Sarasota. Several years later New College merged into the University of South Florida. In 2001 it became an independent college of the State University System of Florida and is now called New College of Florida. It is a public liberal arts college with enrollment of 689 undergraduate and graduate students Fall 2022). Their website <https://www.ncf.edu/> calls them the Honors College of Florida, with their motto being "Join Our Community of Free Thinkers, Risk Takers and Trailblazers." They have an open admissions policy, welcoming diversity.

So why is this small college making so much news?

Governor DeSantis has crusaded to overhaul higher education in Florida, pledging to end diversity, equity and inclusion programs. In January, he replaced six out of thirteen New College trustees with conservative allies. Within weeks, President Patricia Okker was fired, and a new interim President, Richard Corcoran, was appointed. Richard Corcoran is a former Florida Education Commissioner and advocate of banning critical race theory in the schools. He was hired at a base salary of \$699,000, *more than twice that of the outgoing president*. On the positive side, DeSantis is pledging \$15 million badly needed dollars in immediate financial support to New College, which has suffered from declining enrollment and antiquated facilities.

As for Education K-12

Last year Governor DeSantis and the state legislature adopted a law known as the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act,"-the acronym standing for "Stop the Wrongs to our Kids and Employees."-The bill, also known as the Individual Freedom Act (IFA), basically strengthens the enforcement authorization of the Florida Dept. of Education.

Gov. Ron DeSantis last year approved a law (HB 1467), passed by the Republican-controlled Florida Legislature, requiring school boards to adopt procedures that provide for the "regular removal or discontinuance" of books based on factors such as alignment to state standards, causing delays and confusion while "certified specialists" review books. Although this law does not specifically recommend criminal penalties if school personnel have unreviewed books in their classrooms, some school districts have warned employees of this possibility, prompting more fear.

Governor DeSantis also contested a high school AP (Advanced Placement) course in African American Studies, and upon pushback, spoke of severing a relationship with the College Board, which administers AP classes and the SAT exam in high schools.

It's concerning that today's kids may not have the educational opportunities my kids had twenty years ago when they took AP classes at Largo High, preparing them to be competitive on their SATs and in their college courses. Florida needs educated young people who will eventually become leaders in our communities.

Save the date: **March 2nd**
6pm EST

VIRTUAL PRESS CONFERENCE



for the Florida Right to Clean Water initiative

- What's the latest with the campaign?
- What needs to happen to succeed?
- What do voices of Florida have to say?
- Plus -- a Q&A at the end

With special guests,
Erin Brockovich and
Maya van Rossum!



DATES TO REMEMBER

- February 28, 2023 Indian Shores Meet the Candidate Night 5:30-7:00 PM Indian Shores Town Hall
- March 6, 2023 New Member Orientation at 5:30 pm via Zoom
- March 8, 2023 March Board meeting 4 pm via Zoom a
- March 7-8 2023 Lobby Days/ Legislative Summit
- April 1, 2023 **Annual Meeting and Luncheon, 10 AM, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Clearwater**
- April 6, 2023 LWVNP Line Dancing Social, Mediterranean Manor Clubhouse, Dunedin 2-4 pm.

Reflections: My Florida Vote...

Niki Amarantides

Niki is a LWV member from Washington State who recently moved to Florida and joined our League. Hear her impressions of our voter registration process here:



What a difference a state makes! I moved to Palm Harbor, Florida in November 2022 from Seattle WA. I had a list of all the changes I needed to make: register my car, get a FL drivers' license, insure my car, set up WiFi, register to vote, locate a primary doctor and dentist—and find a place to get my hair cut. It's a familiar list, and we all have different priorities. For me, registering to vote was in my top 5.

Coming from Seattle, I was used to voting by mail for 15 years. Like FL, I could register to vote at the Department of Motor Vehicles (or I could register online with my license or state ID number). I didn't have to know where my polling place was located: my voter info came by mail, as did my ballot. Using a ballpoint pen to fill in circles for candidates or propositions, and signing the outside of the ballot envelope was all it took to cast my vote. No postage needed. I could put my ballot in a mailbox or take it to the drop boxes located in my neighborhood or where I worked—drop boxes were plentiful. I could vote early; I could vote on election day. I didn't have to let WA state know if I wanted a mail in ballot: we all were voting by mail. If we were new to the state or just plain forgot to register to vote, we could register to vote on election day and get a provisional ballot that would be counted later.

In November I requested mail-in voting, thinking I would be all set for the next election, until I got a text on Jan. 30 from Vote America telling me that vote by mail forms submitted before Nov. 8 have expired and that I had to submit a new application, each election cycle in order to vote by mail. If I had any change of address, I had to get that reported 29 days before the next election. What a difference a state makes for easy, accessible voting. Considering Florida's limited mass transit options and the many seniors who may lack online access or smart phones for updates, why not make mail-in voting easier not harder? Florida: let's move forward!