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Members of the League of Women Voters... include Mona Elaber, far left, Janet Stoker, inside left, Adele... Jennie Gray, inside right, Marcy Lutzenberg, far right, Be... Williams, front right. The league celebrates its 60th anniversary this month. - Luis Sanchez/Saturday



League of Women Voters: A community's voice

Group celebrates 60 years in Santa Fe

Anne Constable | The New Mexican
Posted: Thursday, September 15, 2011 - 8/31/11

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For its 40th anniversary, the League of Women Voters of Santa Fe County put on a nautical musical starring Debbie Jalapeno, Max Cauliflower and Lucky Vanilla that involved a voyage down the Santa Fe River with Cap'n Sam at the helm.

This month, when the league turns 60, the celebration will be a bit more sedate — a reception at the National Park Service Building on Sept. 24 for invited guests.

But in the spirit of an older league, Marianne Hale sings a hilarious song about former, term-limited Gov. Bruce King during the closing shots of a 21-minute film on the history of the organization made for this year's anniversary.

"Way down there in Stanley," she croons, "alfafa grows high. But I can still see the Roundhouse where I've got my eye. For parting was painful. I'd like to return, occupy my old office. For that I still yearn."

Over its 60-year history, the league occasionally presented a performance of "The Follies," but it's real work has always been more serious. Best known today for voter forums and nonpartisan election guides, it has produced numerous in-depth and well-respected reports on local issues, helped draft legislation and monitored proceedings in courts and at public meetings.

The league was actually first formed here in 1920 by Ina Sizer Cassidy, wife of painter Gerald Cassidy, just after the ratification of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. She was appointed by Carrie Chapman Catt, the suffragette who was the first president of the national League of Women Voters, to start the state LWV and began the local branch the same year.

The original purpose was to educate and register women to vote. Cassidy, along with writer Mary Austin and poet Witter Bynner, had attended one of the large suffrage marches in New York City, according to research assembled by the league for the 60th anniversary

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Meetings at Cassidy's home at 924 Canyon Road drew so much attention from the public and from politicians that police were frequently called to calm the crowds. "I think they might have had a few cocktails," suggested Jenny Crystle, one of the league members working on the history project.

The original league dissolved around 1928, apparently over issues of partisanship. Then in 1951 it was reorganized by Bertha Dutton, an archaeologist associated with the Laboratory of Anthropology with new by-laws emphasizing that the league's work would be 100 percent nonpartisan, Crystle said. It quickly grew to 150 members, about the same size as today.

Since then the league has conducted numerous studies, many of which have led to new laws and practices. Although the topics are agreed on by the members, at the outset nobody knows how they are going to end up. "It's open," said Judy Williams, the current president. "We're just going to look at (the subject) and come to a shared position."

That's the case with a study just getting started, led by former City Councilor Karen Heldmeyer, on the Municipal, Magistrate and District courts in Santa Fe. "Over the coming year, we want to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the courts so that, in the LWV way, we can gain consensus on any changes that might be helpful to the local court system and present the results of our study to the courts and other relevant governments."

Studies are also under way on the bond referendum process, the city's northwest quadrant and land use. And the league agreed this year to videotape meetings around the state on redistricting, the subject of the special legislation session that began Tuesday.

In the early days the league's interests centered around liberalizing divorce laws, suppressing prostitution, eradicating venereal disease and supporting the League of Nations.

When it was reformed in the 1950s, the group organized the first debates at which the candidates were compelled to tell voters more than their name and the name of their spouse. The league opposed the practice of politicians of buying votes with \$10 bills and sending limos to drive people to the polls. Later it began publishing voter guides that many people have since carried with them on Election Day.

In addition to initiating the candidate forums, the league in the 1950s also conducted a study of local education, promoted the fluoridation of water and studied the personnel requirements for police officers.

In the following decades the league educated the public on the use of voting machines, pushed for the adoption of a city master plan and worked to make sure that the council adhered to it, administered the county's medically indigent fund, supported development of the juvenile detention center, lobbied for a constitutional convention and a new state constitution. In the 1970s it founded the local farmers market, worked for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and conducted an in-depth study of county government.

Community activist and league member Bernie Beenhouwer helped draft the city's first code of ethics which was passed in 1982 and wrote articles for the *Santa Fe New Mexican* on it. In 1968 it supported home rule for municipalities. In the 1990s, the league monitored sexual violence trials, promoted all-day kindergarten, sponsored workshops for women interested in running for office, and supported regional planning by the city and county.

In the last 10 years the league has been monitoring the county's sustainable growth plan and has studied the role and structure of the Public Regulation Commission, produced a water report for Santa Fe and investigated alternative energy, among other things.

This fall the league is being recognized by the Foundation for Open Government with the William Dixon First Amendment Freedom award for its government-transparency study that led to major improvements in information available on the county's website. Headed by Jody Larson, the study, among other things, recommended that local governments hold meetings in executive session only when absolutely necessary, even though the Open Meetings Act allows otherwise.

"Good processes are open to the public," said Janet Stoker, an active member of the league.

In the '50s, when many women were at home, primarily running their households, they put their extra energy into league work, including the satirical reviews. Today most of those women are in the workforce and have little extra time for volunteering. "But at some point they stop working. And there's the league," Stoker said.

Today there are 150 dues-paying members, although around 15 do most of the work.

Williams, who was a league member in Miami where she was involved in national health policy, said the group appeals to issues-minded people who want to have an impact on the community. "You have more of a voice as a league member," she said. "You can really get involved in something and people listen."

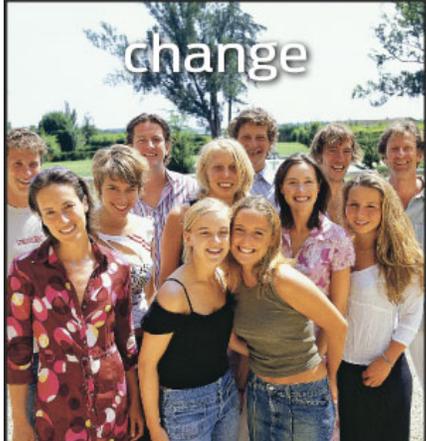
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