



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF MARYLAND, INC.

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

SB 529 OPEN MEETINGS ACT – REQUIREMENTS FOR PROVIDING AGENDAS

POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT

BY: BARBARA SCHNACKENBERG AND NANCY SORENG, CO-PRESIDENTS

DATE: FEBRUARY 25, 2016

The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that democratic government depends on informed and active participation in government and requires that governmental bodies protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings and making public records accessible. This has been a principle of the League since our founding in 1919.

We believe that informing citizens of the subjects to be addressed in a meeting provides them the information needed to know whether their attendance at the meeting is relevant to their interests and concerns. Such information in addition to the date, time and place of the meeting of a public body encourages active citizen participation in their government and gives the citizen the opportunity to prepare for their direct participation in the proceedings, as appropriate.

Under the Open Meetings Act as enforced by the Open Meetings Compliance Board, a public body is required to meet in open session, prepare a motion to close the meeting and announce the reason for closing the meeting. Following that announcement, the members of the public body must take a vote in open session on whether to close the meeting. The League considers these requirements vital to the definition of an open meeting and to assuring accountability on the part of members of the public body. Determining in advance that a portion of the meeting may be closed should not replace the requirements for announcing at the convened meeting the reason for closing all or a portion of a meeting and taking a public vote on the motion to close the meeting. We see no reason why this information should not be in the agenda. While there are valid reasons allowed in the Open Meetings Act for closing a meeting, it is vital to a democracy that these reasons are announced when applicable and the members of the public body should be held accountable for closing a meeting.

The League urges the committee to amend this bill to assure that the language in proposed section 3-302.1.C. does not contradict the current procedure for closing a meeting of a public body.