

Talbot Council honors the frequently controversial League of Women Voters

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Staff Writer

The League of Women Voters celebrates its 75th anniversary today, and its local chapter will be honored by the Talbot County Council for activism in the county's political debate.

The League, best known for sponsoring presidential debates and voter registration drives, is more opinionated than most people think, taking stands on issues such as health care reform and the motor voter bill, but strictly holds the line on one item: it remains utterly non-partisan, keeping candidates at arm's length.

"Within the League itself, you really don't know people's affiliations," said Phyllis Cobbs, a Talbot League member.

Locally, the League has weighed in on some of the county's most controversial issues of the past 25 years.

In the early 1970s, the Talbot election board office was open two days a week during business hours.

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— Nellie Bissell

Some members petitioned the board to allow the League to register voters themselves. It wasn't a well-received request, according to the League, but eventually it was approved.

The result was an on-going registration drive that sends League members to high schools, nursing homes and supermarkets, urging young and old citizens to register.

The League was also instrumental in establishing zoning protections for farm land, and for adaptation of a county building code.

"We find problems in the county and then we try to get other organizations to join with us and then take it over and get something done. We're sort of a catalyst," said Nellie Bissell, one of the 120-member

league's most active members.

A regular fixture in what are usually empty spectator seats at weekly county council meetings, Bissell has for years reported back to the League on the council's weekly proceedings.

"I can't think of anyone who's done more for the League than she has," Cobbs said.

Talbot's League, now in its 24th year, has taken stands on Talbot's current raging controversy: its property tax cap and the lawsuit filed to lift it.

In the fall, the League came out against a charter amendment ballot initiative that would have raised taxes for Talbot schools, fire departments and police.

The League called the

amendments, which would have established so-called "specialty" taxes, illegal and urged their defeat. The ballot questions failed miserably.

Then the League joined a lawsuit against the county last month, seeking to have the tax cap declared illegal. That suit has yet to be decided, but thrusts the League into a divisive, highly public dispute over the county's education dollars.

Yet it's the other side of the League that people remember.

It's the stunningly non-partisan Voter's Guide that costs the League \$3,500 each election to publish, complete with candidates' written stands on various positions; it's the Meet-the-Candidates-Night the League sponsors in library meeting rooms; it's the potluck suppers with local politicians to discuss health care.

That's what people connect with the League of Women Voters: pure civic-mindedness. Meticulously keeping track — and getting excited about — the boring details of government that most of us don't bother to watch.