

OBSERVERS: THE EYES AND EARS OF THE LEAGUE

Basic to effective League activity in a community is understanding how the local government works. A local League observer is the eyes and ears of the League, learning how government works and about issues that are or may become items for local study and action. Consistent League presence at these meetings can add to the League's visibility and credibility.

The Open Meetings Law ensures "the right of all citizens to have advance notice of and to attend all meetings of public bodies at which any business affecting the public is discussed or acted upon, with certain limited exceptions to protect the public interest and preserve personal privacy." Consistent with this purpose, the general requirement of the law is that "all meetings of public bodies shall be open to the public at all times."

As an observer, you are exercising that recognized right to be present at any public meeting.

OBJECTIVES

To monitor governmental bodies for information of importance to the League and the community/state.

RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Attend assigned meetings, arriving promptly.
2. Take notes/fill out observer form.
3. Report to the board.
4. Advise the board of opportunities for action on League positions

PROCEDURES

- The president can write a letter to the proper official introducing the observer(s). The letter can also request copies of meeting agendas if they are available.
- As a courtesy, observers should introduce themselves to the meeting chair.
- Remember observers are there to observe.
- Observers may ask questions for clarification, information or knowledge. Keep an impartial attitude.
- Observers may speak for the League only if authorized to do so. Use written comments approved by board so you won't be misunderstood, and leave a copy for inclusion in minutes of meeting. Have copies for distribution to the members of the board/agency and media.
- Take notes during meeting to help in preparing a report for the League Board.

REPORTING

FORMAL:

- Include the name of the board or agency, date, place and names of officials present and absent.
- Describe the business, particularly those items pertinent to League program.
- Comment on the conduct of the meeting and standards used in reaching decisions.
- Include pertinent personal observations on attitude of participants, both the members of the board or agency and those in the audience.
- Remember to include the name of the observer(s).
- Attach the agenda and any news articles.

INFORMAL:

- If the board/agency you are observing is acting according to established procedures, purposes and is reasonably covered in newspapers there may be no need for a formal report. But, if the League has special concerns or an observer finds conduct questionable, a formal report should be done.
- In either case, the board should receive regular reports that you have attended meetings.

TECHNIQUES

- Be familiar with League program. Read state and national "Impact on Issues."
- Understand the function and responsibilities of the board/agency being observed.
- Know the names of the board or agency members and staff.

Follow-up is most important. Be sure to write reports, if necessary and share information with the appropriate program item directors.

Being an observer can be interesting and fun. It puts the League on the inside, hearing decisions that will affect the community/state and the League.