

Louisiana Commission on Civic Education

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MINUTES

November 5, 2015

I. CALL TO ORDER

A meeting of the Louisiana Commission on Civic Education was held on Thursday, November 5, 2015 in the John J. Hainkel Jr. Room at the State Capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The chairwoman, Beth Courtney called the meeting to order at 2:02 p.m.

II. ROLL CALL

The secretary called the roll and the following was noted:

MEMBERS PRESENT

Beth Courtney (Chair)
John Alexander
Nancy Beben
Fredell Butler
Peggy Cotogno
Shan Davis
Richard Hartley
Brenda Hodge
Polly Johnson
Judge Wendell Manning
Lawrence Narcisse
Kelly Pepper
Sanettria "Sam" Pleasant
Lauren Russell
Robert Travis Scott
William Stoudt (proxy - Judd Jeasonne)
Sarah Turner

MEMBERS ABSENT

Sen. Yovvne Dorsey-Colomb (Vice-Ch)
Sen. Conrad Appel
Rep. Steve Carter
Barry Erwin
Rep. Patrick Jefferson
Terry Landry
Pamela Mitchell-Wagner
Judge Karen Roby
Anita Sexton

STAFF PRESENT

Tammy Crain-Waldrop, Researcher
Nanette Normand, Administrative Secretary

III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Fredell Butler made a motion to approve the minutes from the May 22, 2015 meeting, and there being no objection, the minutes were approved.

IV. BUSINESS BEFORE THE COMMITTEE

Chairwoman Courtney introduced Ms. Sarah Turner from the Governor's office as a new member of the commission.

Every year the commission submits an annual report and Chairwoman Courtney asked everyone to please look over the annual report if they had not already done so, paying special attention to any sections they submitted to be certain that nothing needs to be changed or added.

Judge Wendell Manning moved to approve the annual report, and there being no objection, the annual report was approved.

Mr. Reginald Brown and Ms. Karen Lord from Holiday Helpers as well as St. Vincent de Paul came before the commission to describe their program to help the needy during the holiday season. Holiday helpers began in the fall of 1987 with a group of people who gathered for lunch and someone suggested how nice it would be if everyone could take part in a "community Thanksgiving dinner". Three weeks later it happened in Baton Rouge. The first Thanksgiving dinner was served at Independence Hall with a few hundred volunteers serving over 1,200 people. All of the food for the dinners are either donated or purchased at a small cost by area businesses and individuals. We have been doing this for 29 years and now we also include Christmas by supplying gifts to children.

Mr. Robert Travis Scott, who is a member of the commission, and also the president of PAR came to discuss the trend toward low voter turnout in Louisiana. PAR is a non-profit, independent public policy research group. The latest election on October 24th had a very low turnout. It was 39% or 1.1 million people voting. Even though people give all sorts of reasons for the low turnout of a particular election this is a trend that has been going on since the 80's. There is one thing that Louisiana does very well and that is register people to vote. Back in 1983, we had 2.1 million people registered to vote, today we have 2.9 million people. That is an increase of 760 thousand people. We have increased our voter registration rolls by 760 thousand people, but the number of people actually going to the polls to vote has declined by half a million. Our overall voter registration compared to the rest of the country is actually above the national average. During the presidential elections we are still above the national average in voters so it's not like we are doing that badly in comparison to the nation.

Mr. Scott also mentioned the Geaux Vote app which has been produced by the Secretary of State. This app allows you to see your ballot for the upcoming election as well as many other helpful features.

Richard Hartley commented on the fact that in his job at the Secretary of State's office, under Jay Dardenne, he worked in the Voter Outreach section and visited many schools and nursing homes to hold mock elections and explain the voting process. He has found that over the years with schools emphasizing testing that social studies has been neglected.

Judge Wendall Manning stated that steps have been taken in the last two years to increase the credit hour requirement for civic education. As well as bring about programs that would actively engage people at a younger age. By the time students are in high school it is too late, there are too many other distractions.

Chairwoman Courtney commented that it appears the states with high voter turnout allow mail in ballots. The other thing is that we don't have many places for people to go vote early. In Baton Rouge there are only three places. So it would appear that access to early voting is an issue.

Mr. Scott mentioned that the Secretary of State has a real need to upgrade the current voting machines. They are looking at the use of ipads for voting as well as having voting centers for people to vote which would mean you would not have to vote in your precinct but you would be able to stop at a voting center near where you are on election day and vote.

Students from Denham Springs High School, as well as their sponsors, Ms. Jessica Raymond and Ms. Elise LeBlanc came before the commission to talk about a club that was formed in their school called JADD - Jackets Against Destructive Decisions. This group of students encourages other youth to make decisions against drinking, drugs, and other destructive tendencies. Several students came forward and talked about the various activities they had held to get information out to others.

D'Wayne Bell, President of the Legislative Youth Advisory Council updated the commission on the activities of the council. Some of those activities included Leadership Day, participation in LPB's show "Public Square", World Peace Day at the capitol, as well as a brief overview of each meeting. LYAC has also provided a copy of our annual report to each member of commission. This year the council is looking into several ideas to bring forth to the legislature. Some of them are limiting the number of hours a student spends on extra curricular activities to allow for more study and family time; engaging volunteer counselors in the schools who would be there to focus solely on the emotional and personal matters of students instead of just academics; putting together a voter registration campaign which would include inviting bipartisan speakers to the schools to speak on candidates.

Chairwoman Courtney questioned D'Wayne about the decline in voting and his thoughts on it and ways to improve it. D'Wayne stated that he worked on campaigns for various candidates and part of it included knocking on doors, and he sees a lethargic attitude about voting. He is unsure what it is, maybe a lack of education, many of his classmates who turned 18 this year were not interested in registering to vote. They feel that their vote doesn't matter, their voice doesn't matter. Maybe it is a lack of access to the polls, misinformation about the candidates, or maybe our candidates are just boring.

Lauren Russell and Morgan Blanchard gave an update on the Legislators Back to School

program. Last year the House of Representative had 38 representatives who went to 44 schools and this year so far we've had 5. The Senate had 23 senators who went to 30 schools and this year so far we've had about 10 school visits. There has been a dramatic drop in participation and part of it is due to the fact that in previous years NCSL sponsored the program and supplied classroom materials for each legislator when they visited a school. Due to budget cuts that is no longer available. Several commission members offered their informational resources to the back to school program.

V. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, Fredell Butler moved to adjourn. Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 3:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Beth Courtney, Chairwoman

Approved: