

The Montgomery County League in 2008 - 2009

Spring 2008: In early April 2008, Carol Lindstrom did a FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request of the Town of Christiansburg for a copy of the Town's Charter & Code. When it was not honored in the time allowed by the Virginia FOIA, Carol contacted Senators John Warner & Jim Webb. Both Senators demanded that the Town comply with Carol's request. They did. A couple days afterward, in early May, four Christiansburg activists (Terry-Ellen Carter, Meghan Dorsett, Carol Lindstrom & Tacy Newell-Foutz) were sued by Christiansburg developer, Roger Woody, for >\$30 million in a suit the Virginia ACLU has labeled a SLAPP suit or Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation. Long time Christiansburg LWV member and our original Christiansburg activist, Ann Hess, arranged a meeting between these four women and League members. The four women joined the League in early June. The ACLU defended Terry-Ellen and Tacy in that law suit. Circuit Court Judge Ray Grubb dismissed the suit; it was appealed to the Virginia Supreme Court where it was dismissed.

Also, in April, the Roanoke Times reporter, Donna Alvis-Banks, exposed that Christiansburg violated FOIA in their budget preparation process. Donna subsequently retired from The Roanoke Times and she also has joined the League.

Karen Cronin was our League's delegate to the LWV-US Convention in Portland, Oregon, in mid-June.

Summer 2008: We reinstated a study of Town Financial Procedures approved by members in 2007 with Carol and Tacy joining Maria Roth and me. Carol continued to use FOIA to request Christiansburg information such as minutes of Town Council and Planning Commission meetings back to 2001, Town Capital and Operating Budgets and Town expenditures. She then put this information on one of her web sites so that it is accessible to anyone with internet service. Also, Carol has been taping Christiansburg government meetings and putting these tapes on her web site. The study committee has spent almost a year examining the Christiansburg Charter & Code and the Virginia Code. We have been applying these codes to the Christiansburg information Carol has gathered.

The Board appointed Darlene Allen as Bev Fleming's successor as Chair for Facts for Voters and asked Darlene to join the Board. The Board asked Carol to join the Board as its Christiansburg representative.

Fall 2008: We resumed our First Tuesday informal lunches, moving them to a private dining room at Bogens. Sometimes we say in advance what we want to talk about, but most of the time conversation topics are a mix of public policy and whatever else interests our members. The lunches have been popular so we decided to continue them throughout the summer.

Judy Snoke and her committee helping with the Virginia League study of Felons' Civil Rights presented an outstanding panel discussion, "Community Re-Entry for Non-Violent Felons" on October 9. The DVD of that program has been copied at the request of other organizations and it was shown on WTOB. If you haven't seen it, borrow the DVD from us. We came to consensus November 4. Judy has continued to address the problems faced by Virginia felons after they have been released from prison. Nationally, Virginia and Kentucky have the most punishing restrictions on released felons. Judy's op-ed on this subject was printed in the Sunday, May 3, issue of The Roanoke Times.

Carol Lindstrom and Terry-Ellen Carter, working with newly elected Christiansburg Town Councilman Henry Showalter, decided it was important to move Christiansburg Town elections from May to odd-year November in order to involve more citizens in Christiansburg governance. With the help of David Scheim and Kay Moody from BURG, they prepared a petition to bring a referendum to Christiansburg voters in November 2009 to move the Christiansburg Town elections to November. To be successful, they had to get 10% of the registered voters to sign the petition. They succeeded in getting almost 20% to sign with help from our Christiansburg members and former Christiansburg Town Councilman, Steve Huppert.

The focus of the rest of our Fall activities was the Fall elections. Mary participated in a panel on Touch Screen Voting Machines in Radford in September. Then she spoke about Presidential election procedures to the Roanoke Woman's Club and to international students at the Cranwell Center in October. Karen Cronin, with the help of Dee Pourchot, arranged for our School Board, District A, Candidates' Forum October 27. Anna Hawthorne did most of the work to arrange for us to co-sponsor a showing on October 25 at the Lyric of *Iron Jawed Angels*, an HBO film about how the actions of Washington DC suffragettes and the dreadful treatment they subsequently received in a Virginia prison led to the rapid passage in 1920 of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution giving women the right to vote. Anna now is making plans to show the film again this Fall. We especially want the Tech co-eds to understand the sacrifices of many women (and some men) that led to their right to vote. The US LWV was created by suffragettes after the 19th Amendment was ratified.

But, the big election issue locally this Fall was, "Can dorm students register to vote where they live during the school year?" Virginia law requires voters to register in the location of their domicile. Tracy Howard, Radford City Registrar, and Randy Wertz, Montgomery County Registrar, interpreted "domicile" differently. Howard required that dorm students cast absentee ballots where their parents' live. Wertz allowed Tech dorm students to register in Montgomery County. The number of registered voters in Montgomery County increased by 17%. The State Board of Elections asked us to help Wertz's office handle all those new registrations. Many members helped. Two League members are now serving on a 12 person committee formed by the State Board of Elections to recommend changes in Virginia law. They are Olga Hernandez, president of the Virginia League, and Cynthia Chappelke, who serves on the Montgomery County Electoral Board.

We had breakfast with the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors December 8. Conversation centered around the County's capital expenditures and operating budget, especially school costs.

Winter 2008 – 2009: We were asked by the Virginia League to try to persuade some local House of Delegates members to vote for a bill creating a Bi-Partisan Commission to oversee redistricting in 2011. I contacted local leaders of other non-profit organizations that were in a coalition with the League to try to achieve this goal. We formed an ad hoc committee made up of Karen Cronin, Tacy Newell-Foutz, Darlene Allen and Carol Lindstrom to try to persuade Delegate Dave Nutter and try to influence Delegate Morgan Griffith. Tacy wrote an article on the legislation and Carol blogged about it. We failed.

Ann Hess, helped by Terry Ellen Carter, has been observing Christiansburg Town Council meetings. She wrote a letter to the Mayor and Town Council recommending some changes in meeting procedures. In February Council Members Ernie Wade and Jim VanHoozier met with Ann and me to discuss her letter.

In late January we were informed that we were one of 12 Leagues in the US that had won a Citizen Initiative for Transparency Grant. Carol Lindstrom is the Project Coordinator and she has committed herself to share her expertise on the Virginia FOIA with Virginia Leagues and Virginia citizens. Carol has now set up a new web site: vaopengov.org and a special email address to do that. Karen Cronin will work with Carol to create a brochure to help citizens access public information using FOIA. Tacy, who has a column in The News Messenger, will publicize how to access government information in Montgomery County.

Amy Mauldon came back on the Board as Program Chair, taking much responsibility for our Spring programs.

January 28 Great Decisions started its 8-weeks of analysis of international issues with Dee Pourchot and Jane Sprague doing all of the arrangements. Twenty-eight people participated in the weekly discussions of topics based on information from the Briefing Book and a DVD of a panel of experts. Jane arranged for the DVDs to be shown on WTOB.

February 5, Bev Fleming, Karen Frazier, Julia Lewis, and Millie Wiggert gathered at Darlene Allen's to help her count 12,000 copies of FACTS into packets of 50 and deliver them to various County locations.

February 18 we hosted a dessert with the School Board and School Superintendent Tiffany Anderson. Topics discussed included the relationship between population growth and the location of new schools.

Spring 2009: Harriett Cooper launched our annual finance drive in March. Those finance drives are very important to us.

March 30, we sponsored a Forum of outside experts discussing Downtowns Re-Visioned. Along with residents of both Blacksburg and Christiansburg, some members of the Town Councils and Planning Staffs of both Towns attended the Forum. The Forum was well covered in the press. It was shown on WTOB and was available on two of Carol Lindstrom's web sites.

We hosted a breakfast with the Blacksburg Town Council April 21. School Board member Joe Ivers and Supervisor John Muffo came too and this led to a good discussion of the fate of the old Middle School property.

Karen Cronin, Meghan Dorsett, Carol Lindstrom, Amy Mauldon and Mary were delegates at the Virginia League convention in Reston May 2 – 3. We introduced delegates to our new open government web site and Carol offered to help Virginia Leagues with their FOIA requests.

Throughout the year, Secretary Barbara Boyd, Treasurer June Schmidt and Membership Chair Betty Williams keep this league functioning. Our newsletter is the liveliest in Virginia, thanks to Mary Ann Johnson. Mary Ann, Betty and I share good times as we prepare League mailings. We are a very active League because we have the help of many members. Thank you all.