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2010 Session of the General Assembly Women's Roundtable Report

Legislative Forum

*meets every Wednesday during session 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. 3rd floor conference room West
Notes by Amy Burgett of Richmond*

January 20, 2010

Women's Roundtable, January 20, 2010, 8:30AM, Senate Room 3 West, General Assembly Building
Olga Hernandez, President of the League of Women Voters of Virginia (LWV-VA) opened the forum by introducing herself and the League's role as moderator of the Women's Roundtable while the General Assembly (GA) is in session. She welcomed all attending, explaining that the Women's Roundtable is a forum for exchange of ideas, and concerns about pending legislation among citizens, legislators and lobbyists, and that traditionally, due to their limited time, Senators and Delegates are offered the floor as each arrives. She disclosed that the LWV-VA is celebrating its 90th anniversary on February 14, 2010, and has published a book, *Virginia Women & the Vote, 1909 – 2009*, commemorating the Equal Suffrage League which transformed into the LWV-VA, which is available this morning for a \$10 contribution.

Anne Sterling, LWV-VA Legislative Coordinator, spoke briefly about her role in following legislation of interest to the League through committee meetings to the floor of the General Assembly. Ms Sterling noted that the budget of the Commonwealth is required to be balanced, and that the budget presented by former Governor, Tim Kaine proposes some tax hikes to address the considerable revenue shortfalls; the current Governor Bob McDonnell has indicated he will not accept the recommendation to raise taxes, and therefore many are in a quandary about where the funds may be identified to balance the budget for the next biennium.

Ben Greenberg, Legislative Director of the Virginia Organizing Project (VOP). Mr. Greenberg noted that he represents a number of nonprofit organizations coalesced under the umbrella of the VOP in a common agenda, which will be focused on increasing state revenue by changing Virginia's tax code, which has not been changed in many years, is regressive in nature. These efforts will include eliminating the 2.5% tax on food. Working with VA PERL, Virginia Partnership to Encourage Responsible Lending, he will also focus on predatory lending, noting that the General Assembly in its last session successfully addressed some of the most egregious actions by predatory lenders, who cleverly reorganized to provide open ended loans including car title loans with interest rates (monthly of 25 – 30%).

Senator Mamie Locke (D) of Hampton noted that there are several legislative initiatives about which she is concerned. She spoke about capping open ended and predatory loans at 36%. She noted that she has submitted a Fair Housing bill (SB216) to train rental managers about current EEOC laws. She explained that Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) had done studies in several population centers and found that there is discrimination in renting at a rate of about 66% based on race, or disability. While Realtors attend mandatory training on the law, the people most directly involved in showing and renting are managers, who may not have received any such training or direction. Also of

great concern to her and concerning which she has entered a bill (SB315) is the disposition of the federal Fort Monroe property (Hampton) which reverts to the State once the environmental issues are addressed. Senator Locke noted the importance of designating a historic area, where a slave market had been held, preserving the northern wetlands, and perhaps allowing the National Parks service to administer a part of the property.

Delegate Vivian Watts (D) Fairfax was introduced, and immediately addressed the preservation of Point Comfort, former slave market as part of the Fort Monroe bill. She went on to suggest that the difficult budget negotiations may see more regionalism as local governments working together to secure taxing power for the localities. In response to a question acknowledged that there may be some divisiveness as regions compete. Delegate Watts spoke about transportation and the funding possibilities. She noted that localities may devise their own remedies, and seek release from the state to go ahead, outside of the state Board of Transportation. She noted that the Governor has proposed selling the ABC interest of the state to private parties, which would achieve a \$100 – \$200,000,000 one time benefit to the state, but would decrease the revenue streams from those state-run businesses. Ms. Watts noted that a package of possibilities proposed in the new Governor’s address would cost some ¾ billion dollars, but no information was offered about how those initiatives would be funded. Delegate Watts spoke of the increased duties performed by State Police under mandates such as Homeland Security, and Felon Registration without possibility of increased personnel to perform these functions, effectively compromising those officers who will work overtime to perform their duties without overtime pay or compensatory time off. She encouraged attendees to be watchful of these issues during the session.

Former State Senator Jane Woods, lobbying the General Assembly for human services groups was recognized. She noted that while Commissions may be continued, the funding for staff support may be eroded, especially in such places as Commissioners of Revenue, Regional Planning Commissions, Community Service Boards, and that staff support is essential to the function of these and other commissions. She reminded the assembled audience that currently some senior, disabled and otherwise compromised persons are afforded housing and integrated services in the community under Medicaid waivers. There is concern that Medicaid waivers for individuals may be lost if they are hospitalized for a period of time greater than 30 days, and institutionalization for some low income and vulnerable populations may result.

As the one hour allotted for the Women’s Roundtable had arrived, Ms. Kate Hanley former Secretary of the Commonwealth was introduced. Olga Hernandez reminded League members that next week [January 27] is League Lobby Day at the GA. The day will include attendance at the Women’s Roundtable, visiting senators and delegates, recognition from the floor of both houses, and a workshop on the budget process in one week. She invited all to return next week, same time and place to continue our oversight of the work of Virginia’s elected Senators and Delegates.