

# THE VOTER

January 2026

Empowering Voters - Defending Democracy

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## A Message from LWVML Presidential Triad —

*Maria Benech, Jare Braga, and Leonides Russell*

## Happy New Year!

Here we are in 2026, the beginning of the second quarter of the twenty-first century. Time flies, doesn't it?

Our League of Women Voters of the Mother Lode marks its 5<sup>th</sup> year as a full league this year! We started in 2018 as an Affiliate, an 'at-large' unit. Our 2020-2021 President Leonides Russell led us through the somewhat arduous process of becoming a fully recognized League, giving us voting rights on state and national league issues (see page 6 for information on Program Planning, which is happening at our February General Meeting) and delegates at conventions.

2026 is an election year. This is the year to make a difference. We can be instruments for change. On a national level, the House and Senate majorities will be determined. Neither Senator Padilla nor Senator Schiff is up for re-election this year, but House Representative McClintock will be on the ballot. Our democracy is dependent upon a system of checks and balances between the three branches of government. This election can help restore that balance.

In California, we will be electing a new governor. In Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties, seats on county boards, utility districts, school districts, as well as numerous local elected officials, including the Sheriff and judges, will be on the ballot.

This is our wheelhouse! The League is a grassroots organization. Now is the time to get involved. What is of interest to you?

Starting in the Spring, in preparation for the June 3<sup>rd</sup> Primary, we will be holding voter registration drives and Candidate Forums. Our committees and interest groups will be working to provide information on important issues. Our Observer Corps will be monitoring local agencies and elected officials to report back to the community on their effectiveness. Pros and Cons of ballot propositions will be prepared and presented.

The mission of the League is to Defend Democracy and Empower Voters. This is our time to shine. We have work to do. Where do you fit in? How do you want to help?

Come to a General Membership meeting, a committee, or an interest group meeting. Step up. Let us know how you can help. We can make a difference. We will "Defend our Democracy!"

*Maria, Jare, and Leonides*



## LWVML December Happenings

Our League was very busy in December, celebrating the season and being active in our community. The season kicked off on December 3<sup>rd</sup> at Courthouse Park, where we put up our tree (right) on Christmas Tree Lane. Although our tree didn't win any prizes this year, we think it was amazing. Great job, crew!



We held our Holiday Party on the 13<sup>th</sup>, and it was a festive affair (see the photos below). Everyone had a great time, enjoying delicious treats, visiting, and learning a lot from the Citizenship Test questions we all did together (great discussions). Thank you to everyone who donated food and/or new twin sheets for the Navigation Center. We had quite the haul to deliver to Nancy's Hope and the Center.



On December 19<sup>th</sup> at Courthouse Park, we led our own Christmas Carol (Silent Night, an easy one, not) at the Pop Hudson Singalong, and then we joined several other groups to support them with their songs. Thank you to all our members who came out and helped make this a wonderful event for our community (photo below).





## No General Meeting in January

**Saturday February 7<sup>th</sup>, 10 am to Noon at the Sonora Main Library**

This is our annual Program Planning Meeting. We'll review what we've done, where we stand, and what we want to do next. This is especially necessary, since now is the time to let the LWV of the United States know what we think it should keep doing, stop doing, or start doing. Join us and help us determine where LWVML is heading in the new year.

### January and February Meetings/Events

**Wednesday January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm**

**Observer Corps** —Jane Braga, Chair  
Senior Center in Sonora

**Monday January 12<sup>th</sup>, 10:30 am**

**Homelessness Interest Group**—Leonides Russell, Lead  
Sonora Senior Center

**Tuesday January 13<sup>th</sup>, 4 pm**

**Fire Interest Group**—Maria Benech, Lead  
Karen Caldwell's Home

**Wednesday January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1 pm to 2 pm**

**Membership** — Patricia Horsthius Chair  
Senior Center in Sonora

**Friday January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm**

**Democracy Interest Group**—Martha Rubin, Lead  
Round Table Pizza in Angels Camp

**Monday January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1 pm to 3 pm**

**Voter Services** — Susan Medeiros, Chair  
Jane Braga's Home

**Monday January 26<sup>th</sup>, 11 am to 1 pm**

**LWVML Board**  
Sonora Senior Center

**Wednesday January 28<sup>th</sup>, 11 am**

**Water Interest Group**—Jane Braga, Lead  
Schnoogs

**Wednesday January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm**

**Observer Corps** —Jane Braga, Chair  
Senior Center in Sonora

**Saturday February 7<sup>th</sup>, 10 am to Noon**

**General Meeting**

Sonora Main Library

**Monday February 9<sup>th</sup>, 10:30 am**

**Homelessness Interest Group**—Leonides Russell, Lead  
Sonora Senior Center

**Tuesday February 10<sup>th</sup>, 4 pm**

**Fire Interest Group**—Maria Benech, Lead  
Karen Caldwell's Home

**Wednesday February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1 pm to 2 pm**

**Membership** — Patricia Horsthius Chair  
Senior Center in Sonora

**Monday February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1 pm to 3 pm**

**Voter Services** — Susan Medeiros, Chair  
Jane Braga's Home

**Friday February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm**

**Democracy Interest Group**—Martha Rubin, Lead  
Round Table Pizza in Angels Camp

**Saturday February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1 pm to 3 pm**

**NEW MEMBER ORIENTATION**

Sonora Main Library

**Monday February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 11 am to 1 pm**

**LWVML Board**  
Sonora Senior Center

**Wednesday February 25<sup>th</sup>, 11 am**

**Water Interest Group**—Jane Braga, Lead  
Schnoogs

**Wednesday February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm**

**Observer Corps** —Jane Braga, Chair  
Senior Center in Sonora

## **Committees and Interest Groups, ~~WHERE THE REAL WORK HAPPENS!~~**

### **Voter Services Committee:**

We were on hiatus in December. Our next meeting is at Jane's house at 1:30 pm on January 16<sup>th</sup> (we have changed our meeting time from 1 pm to 1:30 pm to work around committee member obligations).

2026 is an election year, and those are always a busy time for us. It takes a lot of people to put on numerous events, and we are looking for help to put on Candidate Forums, register/educate voters, and to complete VOTE411 (voter information on local people running for office and ballot measures) for Calaveras and Tuolumne counties. These activities are always a lot of fun and a great way to get involved in the League.

If you are interested in joining us, please contact Susan Medeiros at [susanmedeiros@gmail.com](mailto:susanmedeiros@gmail.com) or at (209) 840-2966.

### **Observer Corps:**

We are working on LWVML's semi-annual report on our local Boards and City Council. We have a special meeting on January 7<sup>th</sup> to begin putting it together. Stay tuned — it's been an interesting six months.

The OC Committee did not meet in November or December. However, we did attend all meetings and observe the local activities of our Boards and Council.

All are welcome to attend our meetings and join in on the fun. Contact Jane Braga at 209-768-3842 or [jbraga49@gmail.com](mailto:jbraga49@gmail.com) for more information.

### **Membership Committee:**

On Saturday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, LWVML will have a New Member Orientation at the Sonora Library from 1 pm to 3 pm. We have not put one of these on since before COVID, so the definition of "new member" is broad. Even if you've been with us for years, but have not attended one of these sessions, we encourage you to join us.

Several Board members will present information on our local League as well as the national and state organizations. This is a great opportunity to ask questions and get to know other League members. We will also provide reference materials and lots of information on how to learn more if you are interested. Snacks will be provided.

## **Water Interest Group (WIG)**

Members: Patricia Horsthuis, Leonides Russell, Suzanne Hennessy, Jeff Hollis, Tom Parrington, and Jane Braga (Lead)

We were on hiatus in December. Our next meeting is January 28<sup>th</sup>, the fourth Wednesday of the month, at Schnoogs, 11:00 am.

## Homelessness Interest Group (HIG)

Members: Ted Michaud, Patricia Horsthuis, Trudy Craig, and Leonides Russell (Lead)

Thank you to all the members who donated new twin sheet sets to the Navigation Center in Soulsbyville. The photo to the right shows Leonides Russell, HIG Lead, delivering our numerous donations. Lief, the Navigation Center manager, was very appreciative.

Our next meeting is Monday, January 12<sup>th</sup> at the Senior Center at 10:30.



## Democracy (in action) Interest Group (DIG)

Members: Tia Andersen, Janis Ossa, Brenda McHenry, Trudy Craig, Irene Wetzels, Susan Medeiros, Karen Caldwell, Maria Benech, Jane Braga, Leonides Russell, and Martha Rubin (Lead)

Our Group is focusing on the true intended meaning of the SAVE ACT. Who will be directly impacted by its passage? We are reading about the SAVE ACT and making bullet points to share at the next meeting, with the hope of creating a handout/flyer to distribute so that we, LWVML, and our neighbors know the truth about what will happen if passed.

We will reach out to our senators, Adam Shiff and Alex Padilla to get their positions and ask for any statements they or their offices can provide. There is a local publication that we will follow up with to gain their perspectives as well.

Meetings will be held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday of the month, at Angels Camp Round Table Pizza at 1:30. The next meeting is January 16<sup>th</sup>. For more information contact Martha Rubin at 650-619-7136 or email [rubinmartha@gmail.com](mailto:rubinmartha@gmail.com)

## Fire Interest Group (FIG)

Members: Karen Caldwell, Martha Rubin, Maureen Kelley, Stefani Reichle, Elsie Bruno, Deborah Rei, Patricia Dunlap, Lynn McCormick, and Maria Benech (Lead)

The LWVML FIG has partnered with the Tuolumne Fire Safe Council (TFSC) to sponsor an event to educate residents on the increasing risk of wildfire to homes, businesses, infrastructure, and natural resources. The goal is to increase people's knowledge and understanding of the many factors that influence wildfire behavior and how we can learn to live with wildfire through adaptation and participation of all.

After a lot of hard work, the Living with Wildfire Series is almost here: March 7<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup>. MARK YOUR CALENDARS: Instead of a March General Meeting, we encourage you to attend the March 7<sup>th</sup> session, which will be at Columbia College.

Each day will build on the story of Wildfire in our County and how we can learn to live with fire while reducing risk to life and property, or each session can stand on its own. The event will feature films, speakers, panel discussions, and audience participation activities. Each session will build on the other, but each also stands alone. More information is coming soon.

Our next meeting will be on Tuesday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, at 4 pm at Karen Caldwell's home.

## It's Our Annual Check-up Time.

Around this time every year, we need to look at what we've done, where we are, and what we want to do. This is especially necessary, since now is the time to let the LWV of the United States know what we think it should keep doing, stop doing, or start doing.

This year is a National Convention. It happens in June, which seems like a long way off in January, but input from 50 states and over 700 Leagues takes a while to process and understand.

We will have a delegate to that convention, but the delegate needs to know how her League thinks about the issues that may be addressed. The National Board will create a "Recommended Program" based on what they learn from all those Leagues.

At the same time, we need to look at our own capacity for what we're doing, what we ought to be doing, and what we might want to add to what we're doing...or not.

This is called Program Planning, and it will be the topic of our General Meeting on February 7. It isn't time to make a decision—we'll do that in June at our Annual Meeting—but it is time to start talking about what's working, what's not working, and what else might be considered.

Here are a few things to think about:

- Mid-term elections are in 2026. There will be many opportunities for Voter Service, including forums, pros & cons, VOTE411.
- All LWV studies lead to action. What types of action can we take, whether it's educating citizens about issues we have looked at, lobbying and addressing legislative bodies about our positions on timely items, or joining with other groups to promote action?
- What is our capacity for achieving our goals? People power is what makes things happen. Do we have leadership and participants?

We have about a month to think about this, so be prepared with your ideas, so that we can have a good discussion.

Brenda McHenry, LWVML Program Chair

### **How You Can Renew/Join**

Renew/join today online at [LWVML.org](https://LWVML.org). Your dues support national, state, and local League efforts. When you go to the website, you will see the "Join" button in the top right corner of your screen. Remember to identify our local league, League of Women Voters of the Mother Lode. This ensures you remain on our mailing list, or if you are a new member, you will receive our monthly newsletter and other important messages (not too many, though).

**We are a 501(c)3 organization, and all donations are tax deductible. Tax ID #873922182.**

# Help Wanted

## Voter Registration Lead

After many years of dedicated service, Pam Vlach is stepping down from this critical position. Thank you, Pam, for your leadership and hard work to make this such a successful part of our League's work.

If you are passionate about voter registration and ensuring voters are getting correct and non-biased information, this is the job for you. This position coordinates volunteers to ensure LWVML has a presence at numerous events and locations to provide this important service. You don't have to go to all the events yourself, but you would be overseeing the work and making sure those doing it are trained and comfortable with this important job. Please contact Susan Medeiros at 209-840-2066 if you are interested.

## Membership Committee Chair

Our League is seeking a new lead for this committee. Some long-time members and the current chair will remain on the committee to assist with contacting members for involvement in League activities, promoting membership engagement, educating new members on what the League is and does, and keeping membership status up to date. This position is a member of the Board of Directors.



## League Cheer

Do you know another member who is:

- Ill or suffered the loss of a loved one;
- Celebrating an important accomplishment?

Call or text Augusta Parrington at 209.770.0211 or email her at [aparrington13@gmail.com](mailto:aparrington13@gmail.com) to ask her to send out a Care Card.

### LWVML 2025/2026 BOARD OFFICERS:

Presidential Triad — **Maria Benech, Jane Braga**  
**Leonides Russell**  
Vice President - **Karen Caldwell**  
Treasurer — **Suzanne Hennessy**  
Recording Secretary — **Janis Ossa**  
Program Director—**Brenda McHenry**

Action Director—**Leonides Russell**  
Publicity Director - **Stefani Reichle**  
The Voter Editor—**Maria Benech**  
Membership Director - **Patricia Horsthuis**  
Voter Services Director—**Susan Medeiros**  
Observer Corp Director - **Jane Braga**  
Fundraising Director—**Deborah Rei**

**LWVML 2025/2026 Off Board Positions:** Corresponding Secretary — **Dorene Hensler**; Nominating Committee Chair - **Leslie Klay**; Nominating Committee Members - **Maureen Kelley** and **Charlene Dambacher**; Historians - **Leslie and Jeff Klay**; Hospitality— **TBD**; Webmaster—**Dorene Hensler**



Join us for a special event series

# LIVING WITH FIRE

Learn to live with fire safely and reduce potential losses from wildfires. Together, we can make a difference.

This series will build on the story of wildfire in our County and how we can learn to live with fire while reducing risk to life and property. The event will feature **films, speakers, panel discussions, and audience participation activities**. Each session will build on the other, but each can also stand alone.

Session 1: Saturday, March 7, 9am-1pm, Columbia College

Fire Risk – How did we get here? Where do we need to go?

Session 2: Saturday, March 14, 9am-1pm, TBD

Reducing Risk in Tuolumne County and Building Resilience

Session 3: Saturday, March 21, 9am-1pm, TBD

Community Prevention & Individual Responsibility

**SAVE THE DATES**

More information coming soon!

