

# THE VOTER

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE HELENA AREA



## League officers

**Co-presidents:** Sue Hoell, Becky Piske

**Treasurer:** Julie Huntington

**Secretary:** Emily Sedgwick

### Board Members:

Membership - Wendy Wheeler

Mary Johnson

Skylar Manley

Sharon Haugen

## Meetings

General meetings occur online at noon on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of every month with some exceptions. The next meeting will be December 13, 2022 in person at the Speakeasy 41 Brewery. (See emailed monthly Update for details.) A ZOOM link is provided by email in advance of most meetings.

## Committee Chairs

**Nominating Committee Chair:** Lynn Hinch

**Program Chair:** Darien Scott

**Publicity Chair:** Marga Lincoln

**Book Club Chair:** Cherri Jones

**Membership Chair:** Wendy Wheeler

**Voter Services:** Run by Committee

**Vote 411 Co-Chairs:** Becky Piske, Mary Harlow

**Transitional Apprentice VOTER Editor:** Sue Hoell

## Message from the Co-Presidents of the League

Hello amazing and wonderful LWVHA members,

This focused VOTER draws attention to a very doable LWV task - participating in the **Observer Corps**. The Observer Corps is an old traditional LWV task, but new to many of us. It has come to life in our League, thanks to members like Barb H, Mickey H, Connie G, and Katherine A. Barb, Mickey, and Connie are attending the Hometown Helena meetings on a regular basis, wearing their LWVHA pins and taking notes while they observe these 7 am meetings, usually twice a month. Katherine will be observing the Helena School District Board of Trustees. One or two other members could join Katherine in this effort.

League member, Barb H has attended Hometown Helena for years. They know Barb as past Co-President of LWVHA. She is occasionally invited to report to Hometown Helena on LWVHA activities and events.

This is a fairly easy commitment. Most meetings of public bodies occur at times more convenient than 7am. Times, topics and venues are often posted online and can be attended via ZOOM. Some meetings are available for later viewing on YouTube or Helena Citizen TV (HCTV) on TV and online.

*(See suggested Observer Opportunities listed below.)*

Thanks for your participation in the Helena League.

Sue and Becky



Barb H and Peter S representing LWVHA at Hometown Helena, Dec 1, 2022



Mickey H and Connie G, LWVHA observing Hometown Helena, November, 2022



Welcome and thank you for participating in the City of Helena's City Commission Meeting. We are pleased to be able to provide this alternative meeting format in the City's efforts to broaden public participation. Please be patient as we may experience technical difficulties during the meeting. We welcome your public commentary during the meeting. Please read the following tips and guidelines for the app usage and your participation.

- You will enter the meeting automatically muted.
- Closed Captioning can be utilized by tapping the "Live Transcription" button on the Zoom tool bar.
- The Mayor will call for public commentary after each action item on the agenda.
- Use the "raised-hand" feature in the app to offer public comment. You will be called upon to speak in sequence. You will be unmuted when acknowledged by the Mayor or the Clerk of the Commission.
- If you are unable to use the "raised-hand" feature, feel free to offer public commentary using the Q & A feature.
- Questions will be recorded, but not necessarily answered directly. You may offer additional thoughts or questions to [mayorandcommission@helenamt.gov](mailto:mayorandcommission@helenamt.gov).
- For phone-in listeners, you may press \*9 to raise your hand and \*6 to mute/unmute.
- If you are offering public commentary, please identify yourself by stating your first and last name.
- At the end of the meeting there is a general Public Commentary Agenda Item. You may use this time to speak on items which are not listed on the agenda.
- If you need assistance in using the software please go to the following link, for helpful tips:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362193-joining-a-Meeting>

Thank you for your cooperation, patience, and courtesy to all who are participating in the meeting.

- Helena City Commission

[Regular City Commission Meeting - November 21, 2022 - YouTube](#)

We don't have a League observer yet for these meetings but hope to, soon.

## **WHY SHOULD YOU VOLUNTEER TO BECOME AN OBSERVER?**

The Observer Corp provides League members an opportunity to learn about their local governments; what their government is doing and not doing and why. When members of a board or agency know that League members are monitoring what they do, it helps to make those agencies more accountable.

## **OBSERVER CORP PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR EACH LEAGUE MEMBER**

League volunteers meet and become familiar with their elected officials and help to educate and inform other League members and the public on the operation of their local government bodies. Observers often become experts on specific areas of local government. They can become a resource for local media.

Observer Corp involvement has motivated some members to volunteer to serve on the board they are observing or to seek elected office. Some boards have been so impressed with the diligence of League Observers, a public board member eventually joins the League.

*Sharing the important information and ideas with others, advances democracy!*

## **YOU CAN CHOOSE THE AGENCY YOU WOULD LIKE TO OBSERVE**

Observers can choose to follow the **Helena City Commission, Lewis and Clark County Commissioners, Helena School Board of Trustees.** These are our suggested prime opportunities for a League Observer. Other opportunities include the Boards of public agencies offering social services, the Airport authority, Parks

and Recreation Board, Zoning/Planning Board or any local or state board that makes public policy decisions.

**Time Commitment:** Meetings occur monthly and most last one hour.

## WHAT DO OBSERVERS DO?

Observers attend meetings in person, watch meetings on public TV, or participate in ZOOM meetings. Attending civic board meetings in person provides opportunities to network with influencers and decision makers to advance common goals. Regular attendance is not necessary but regular monitoring is necessary.

### What do Observers look for at public meetings and what do they record?

1. Was the public made aware of the meeting date, time, and place in advance?
2. Is the venue accessible to members of the public; is the speaker system adequate.
3. Are members of the public present and does the agenda provide an opportunity for public comment?
4. Is appropriate staff present; are the members of board, commission, or agency present? Was the press there?
5. How is the meeting being conducted? Is it following the agenda? Are items being discussed or do decisions appear to be cut and dried?
6. What issues are being discussed; did they approve some action and if so, does it relate to any of the League's priorities or positions.



## **NOW WHAT? WHAT DOES AN OBSERVER REPORT AND TO WHOM?**

The Observer prepares a quick report addressed to the League co-presidents. The information from the report will be included in the Helena League VOTER newsletter. It may trigger a letter from the League requesting certain action of the governing body being observed. It may also be used to develop Letters to the Editor and Legislative Testimony.

## **NEXT STEPS – BECOMING AN OBSERVER**

1. The League president sends a letter introducing the observer to the head of the agency/committee to be observed.
2. When a League Observer attends a meeting in person, they introduce themselves to the presiding officer and secretary/clerk
3. Observers introduce themselves to any members of the media that might be present to begin to foster a relationship/be seen as a resource.
4. Observers wear something (e.g., lapel pin, sticker or button) that identifies them as League members.
5. Observers should arrange to receive the meeting agenda in advance—to verify the availability of the agenda and be familiar with the current business items

## **ARE YOU INTERESTED IN SERVING AS AN OBSERVER?**

Contact Sue [suehoell056@gmail.com](mailto:suehoell056@gmail.com) or Becky [beckyjpiske@gmail.com](mailto:beckyjpiske@gmail.com)

See below for additional information.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR OBSERVERS

Every 10 years, Montana communities have the opportunity to change their form of local government, if appropriate. The next such opportunity is 2024. If League members understand the level of efficiency of Helena's current local government, we will be in a position to weigh in on the need, or not, for change.

City Commission, County Commission, and the School Board are suggested prime opportunities for a League Observer. Below are web links for gathering information on these Commissions and Board.

City Commission Dates and Minutes: [Meeting Minutes & Summaries \(helenamt.gov\)](http://helenamt.gov)  
[City of Helena City Commission - YouTube](#)

The Lewis and Clark County Commissioners Public Meetings are held every Tuesday and Thursday at 9:00 a.m. The Public Meetings are held in the Commission Chambers, Room 330 of the City-County Building. Or [Watch Commission Meetings Live on Helena Civic Television](#)

School-Parent interaction is a hot topic today. Familiarity with the Helena school district could be critical to League testimony on a State and local level.

Helena School District: [Board of Trustees](#) | [Helena Public Schools \(helenaschools.org\)](#)

## **WHAT A LEAGUE OBSERVER NEEDS TO KNOW**

The Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972 and the Sunshine Act of 1976, focus on public access to federal agency meetings and records. All 50 States and some local governments passed similar laws.

One can attend meetings in person, read agendas and minutes from meetings, or watch meetings YouTube or on public TV, summarize what occurred and share summaries with other League members.

Relevant Montana Code sections (These are a few. There are more)

CHAPTER 3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENTAL ...

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS. Part 1. Notice and Opportunity to Be Heard · Part 2. Open Meetings · Part 3. Use of Electronic Mail Systems.

Part 2. Open Meetings - Table of Contents, Title 2, Chapter 3, MCA

TITLE 2. GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATION. CHAPTER 3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS. Part 2. Open Meetings.

2-3-212. Minutes of meetings -- public inspection, MCA

Montana Code Annotated 2021. TITLE 2. GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATION. CHAPTER 3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS. Part 2. Open Meetings.

## **EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF LEAGUE OBSERVER CORPS MEMBERS:**

One League member started a project to help the unhoused community. First, she researched online all the information she could find on what was being done locally to serve the unhoused community. That informed her of the jurisdiction of each agency; functions and/or services it provides; names and titles of the members of the office/agency; time and place of meetings, availability of agenda and minutes; and how the office/agency is funded. Then she interviewed those in her community who were working on the issue. She recruited another League member to go with her to attend the meetings. They both took notes and organized their notes. They recruited League members in other similar cities to research what was being done in those cities. When they had enough data, they organized a community presentation, inviting those who were already working on the issue. The press took note. Soon everything changed. As more people focused and engaged on the issue, brainstorming occurred, grants were obtained, developers and social services organizations stepped up to take on the challenge of serving the unhoused population.

“As a member of the Observer Corps, I take my knitting to County Commissioners meetings, wearing my League button proudly. The commissioners call me Madame LaFarge, but they take my presence seriously. Our local League drafted a code of ethics, which the County Commissioners adopted last year. This was an important step in building a stronger community.” —Mary Gilroy, LWV of Pikes Peak Region (CO)

After a meeting of the Board of Supervisors, a member of a League observer corps asked the chairperson why the minutes of the Board’s meetings were not posted on the county’s Web site. He agreed that they should, and soon they were.

In March 2005, the League of Women Voters of Oakland (CA) released the results of a records-request audit that the League had conducted. About 70 percent of the time, League members were successful when asking for a copy of or permission to see a specific public document. However, when a group of students at Oakland’s Fremont High School made some identical requests, their success rate was only about 50 percent! The League issued a media release about their findings and asked the city attorney to respond.

## **NATIONAL League OBSERVER CORP at the UN**

Are you interested in international issues including Climate, International conflict, Pandemics, Human trafficking, Human rights? LWVUS has a UN Observer Corps that is made up of mostly retired League members living in the New York area, who have spent their careers working in international affairs. They each have an area of specialization that they observe. They often interact casually with UN representatives. A few of them, at their own expense, just returned from COP 27 in Egypt – a UN event.

You can volunteer to pay your own way as a League Observer at COP 28 in Dubai in December 2023. If interested you can sign up by March 2023 on the LWVUS website.

You can follow the National League UN Observer Corps on Twitter @lwvusun or @connie.sensor You can communicate with the League UN Observer Corps on the issues that are most important to you. There is a LWVUS climate action Google Group They are on Facebook at LWVUS United Nations.

Thanks for reading about the LWV Observer Corps.