

## **Sue Legg: Constitutional commission deserves attention**

*By Sue Legg*

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On Oct. 8, the League of Women Voters of Alachua County co-sponsored a remarkable event along with the University of Florida's Levin College of Law and Graham Center for Public Service, a panel discussion entitled "The Florida Constitution at 50 years: Looking ahead to the 2017-2018 Revision Commission."

It was divided into two parts. The first was historical and discussed the activities of the 1977-78 and 1997-98 revision commissions, many of whose members were in attendance as well as serving on the panels. The second panel discussed the issues confronting the 2017-18 commission.

Among the panelists were two former governors and two former legislative leaders. The discussion was illuminating, and the League of Women Voters has begun focusing attention on the formation and activities of this body, to which a former commissioner, Robert Borchin, attributed "awesome power."

The process is unique to Florida. The Constitutional Revision Commission meets every 20 years to suggest amendments to the Florida Constitution. Each commission sets its own operating rules and governs its own procedures. For example, the 1977-78 commission required a majority for an amendment to be drafted while the 1997-98 commission required 60 percent.

The commission decides the level of public input it wishes. All the members are chosen by governmental officials. The attorney general is a mandatory member. The governor chooses 15 members, while the Senate president and speaker of the House each appoint nine. The chief justice of the Supreme Court gets three appointments.

The 1978 commission had none of its recommendations adopted. The 1998 commission had eight of nine adopted. The members of that commission attributed their success to an even partisan balance and high level of citizen participation. That body held extensive public hearings all over the state before the drafting of the amendments began. One commissioner attributed its success to the fact that few legislators or people in public life served that year.

Citizens should be watching the formation and activities of the Constitutional Revision Commission. The commission may draft any amendments on any topic. That's where the power comes in. After the commissioners finish their work, the people must vote to ratify these amendments or not.

The League of Women Voters hopes that the new commission will show the wisdom and leadership of the 1998 commission and engage in a deliberative process, which keeps in mind the purposes of our state constitution as a broad framework for government and engages the citizenry in a discussion of constitutional principles. Several former commissioners felt that the climate is now one of "hyper-partisanship," which might make the process less inclusive.

After the commission does its work and drafts whatever amendments it deems

proper and necessary, the League of Women Voters will study them and speakers from the League will discuss them with the voters. The League is already paying attention to this process and citizens should, too, from the minute it starts.

The League urges you to read up on the Constitutional Revision Commission, its history and activities. Its purpose is to modernize Florida's Constitution in ways that gave the state the capacity to tackle the problems of the future, and that is a very important mandate.

— *Sue Legg is president of the League of Women Voters of Alachua County.*

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