

# Comments to the Saline County Board of County Commissioners And the Salina City Commissioners February 22, 2010

Good afternoon. My name is Ann Zimmerman. I am president of the Salina League of Women Voters (LWV). Our current membership is around 50 members. My address is in rural Saline County, 3904 N. Ohio.

The Salina LWV is here today to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of the LWV. The National LWV began in 1920, the same year that women won the right to vote in national elections. That same year, Kansas was the state where the very first local LWV was formed.

The League began with a goal of providing all those new voters—and in fact all voters—with reliable information they would need to make decisions about issues and government policies. Ever since 1920, the League has done in-depth studies of issues to arrive at positions to support. Then it promotes those positions by lobbying lawmakers and by providing the information to the public at large. The League was originally only women, but for the past 30-plus years, men have also been members. ANY of YOU can join.

IN this our 90<sup>th</sup> year, we are part of a project called **The Quest for a More Diverse Judiciary**. This is a two-year, state-wide effort to draw attention to the diversity (or lack of it) among our judges and to advocate for increased diversity – that includes gender diversity as well as racial and ethnic diversity. We hope that our courts will come to look more like our state and our nation. We have several events to show the public what benefits might come from a judiciary that mirrors the diversity in our state's population.

In Saline and Ottawa County, like about half of the judicial districts in the state, we are fortunate to have a system that takes much of the politics out of the selection of judges. We have a “merit selection process.” We consider it a better system than those districts that elect judges with elections campaigns.

We have a Judicial Nominating Commission made up of four local attorneys and four local non-attorneys, and chaired by a member of the Kansas Supreme Court. The non-attorney members of the Nominating Commission are appointed by the County Commissioners. In the past 5-10 years, the Nominating commission itself has become more diverse, thank in part to the County Commissioners' appointments. For the first time, three of the 8 members are women, including one woman attorney and two non-attorney women. There are no ethnic or racial minorities represented, but that too can change.

Diversity on the Nominating Commission helps ensure a diversity of viewpoints in the selection of candidates for judge. Since people of diverse backgrounds must face those judges in court, it is helpful if the judges are diverse as well.

Saline County is now fortunate to have three women judges – including our municipal judge, Judge Brenda Stoss, our magistrate judge, Judge Mary Thrower, and one of our four district judges, Judge Rene Young.

In our Salina LWV Judicial Diversity project, we have 4 events planned:

FIRST, we are having forum for local college students – that is set for Thursday, March 25, 7pm, at KS Wesleyan's Peters Science Hall. It will include African-American court of appeals judge, Henry Green, and other judges. For the SECOND event: Supreme Court Justice Carol Beier will speak to the public at our annual meeting Saturday, April 17. THIRD, in late August we will have another judge speak to our membership meeting which is also open to the public. And FOURTH, in the fall semester, we will work with a group of local high school students to do research at the Eisenhower Library into early diversity in the judicial system in the Eisenhower years – they will make a public presentation at the end of their project.

For 90 years, the League of Women Voters has been a non-partisan, issue-oriented organization dedicated to a strong democracy and the informed citizenry that keeps our country strong. A fair and diverse judiciary will strengthen our democracy.

To finish, we thank each of you for your public service to our community.

Thank you for allowing us to join you today. Please enjoy our 90<sup>th</sup> birthday cake.