



The League of Women Voters of Dane County, Inc.

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Statement on the City of Madison's Proposed Civil Right Department Public Forum, Thursday, January 27, 2005

In 1962, in response to an NAACP report on discrimination in Madison, an ad hoc group of citizens coalesced around the idea of creating a fair housing law that would eliminate the long-standing practice of discrimination based on a person's race or ethnic background. "A central core of the Fair Housing group belonged to the League of Women Voters who were experienced strategists," as reported in the *Equal Opportunities Commission's 35th Anniversary Report*. This group's efforts resulted in a stronger and more inclusive ordinance.

It is not surprising that League members were leaders in this effort. Since 1928, the Wisconsin League has adopted positions supporting "equal rights for all regardless of race or sex . . . provide equal opportunity for employment, housing, quality of education, and access to public accommodations." The Dane County League's position on preserving human rights 1) in public accommodations, fair employment practices and fair housing and 2) in employment of qualified personnel in local government dates from 1972.

Because of the League's long history in recognizing that the need to eliminate discrimination is a government responsibility, we became concerned when it came to our attention through the media and individual calls that a significant number of those from the protected classes opposed the Civil Rights Department. Critics felt it would hamper not improve the quality of life for minorities. Since then, we have talked with individuals who both support and oppose the establishment of the department.

It appears some of the reasons for opposing the department are: 1) Though the department will not merge the Affirmative Action Department and the Equal Opportunities Commission, it will weaken the voice of each because a Civil Rights Director will be hired who will sit on the Mayor's management team, thus removing the EOC and AAD directors from direct access to the Mayor. 2) Because of the different missions of both departments, the skills and temperament needed by the Civil Rights director will be practically impossible to find in one person. 3) The current management arrangement is more effective because there is a quick way to the top for problem solving on hot spots and issues. 4) Putting the functions in one administrative department could create a conflict because it is the EOC's responsibility to enforce the city's anti-discrimination laws. 5) It seems some of the cost savings suggested in the Mayor's report can be achieved just by co-location of two staffs now in separate buildings: greater sharing of new ideas and best practices on activities they have in common such as outreach, education and training and investigations. 6) It does not appear there has been a recent, thorough evaluation of either department to determine each department's effectiveness.

It appears those speaking in favor of the single department do so 1) Because of what it can become: proactive in addressing the quality of life issues reported in the Madison Comprehensive Plan, vigorously enforcing fair housing laws, and making a government work force reflect the community as a whole in each agency and every level of employment (removing the glass ceiling). 2) It will give civil rights a stronger and more respected voice because the missions of both departments will be coordinated. 3) The sharing mentioned in the paragraph above can be more easily achieved. In fact, the result of cost savings will begin in this budget with the hiring of the Recruitment Specialist, a \$30,000 contract to hire fair housing testers, and a \$20,000 increase in the Language Assistance Program. 4) Both the EOC and AAD have interim directors so it is timely to move in a different direction at this time. 5) It will give one point of access for citizens looking for resources.

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In reflecting on the pros and cons of establishing a Civil Rights Department, the League of Women Voters of Dane County respects the viewpoints of those on both sides of the issue. The end result may be a stronger mission of civil rights for all, but when will that come and at what price? Movement forward cannot be accomplished until support comes from all factions of the minority community. Therefore, we recommend that the establishment of a Civil Rights Department not be rushed through because of budget or hiring of directors' considerations. At the same time, it is our hope that all parties committed to furthering civil rights in Madison sit down together and devise a plan that will bring the whole Madison community together into the 21st century.

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