

Refreshing Democracy
A Community Priorities
Exercise

League of Women Voters of Tacoma-Pierce County
June 2010

Refreshing Democracy

A Community Priorities Exercise

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**Report and Video -
Partially funded by the League of Women Voters of Washington Education Fund**

“REFRESHING DEMOCRACY — A COMMUNITY PRIORITIES EXERCISE”

By Lucinda Wingard

In the face of economic crisis, 38 invitees from the Gig Harbor/Key Peninsula community met for six hours on a sunny Saturday, June 12, to answer two questions:

- Looking ahead from the bottom of this severe recession, what are our key state and local government priorities?
- What actions should be taken now to put revenue and spending in line with economic realities?

This event was initiated and designed by the Gig Harbor-Key Peninsula Unit of LWVT-PC and 26th District State Representative Larry Seaquist. Pierce County, the City of Gig Harbor, and the Peninsula School District signed on as co-sponsors.

Participants—leaders from across the political and social spectrum—divided into topic teams. These activists were asked to put aside their usual advocacy role and assume passionate advocacy for an assigned group: 1) Education & Training, 2) Health & Human Services, 3) Public Safety & Justice, 4) Public Infrastructure, 5) Shared Resource Management, or 6) Personal Responsibility, a group which challenged all others to pare down their ‘asks’ for government support in this economy.



The purpose of this role-playing was to build respect and understanding for other people’s point of view, and to find common ground between people who don’t agree. For this day, creative problem-solving replaced frustrated grouching.

Rep. Seaquist, with wide experience in such “simulation” exercises, presented the bleak economic outlook for each of these groups. He charged participants to settle into their role-playing task by defending government expenditures in their area of concern.

In the first session, groups prepared a report to answer these questions: How have the recent years of state and local budget cuts and tax problems affected us? How will we know when we are thriving again? Are there 1 or 2 or 3 results that we can use to measure success?

Through two more sessions and a working lunch, the groups talked and negotiated with each other. They asked for support and consensus on each other’s ‘bottom line’ initiatives. The Personal Responsibility team, believing people must be more self-reliant and government less big, controlling and wasteful, influenced the other teams to devise plans emphasizing local control and accountability.

In a ranking exercise in the early afternoon, fully funding comprehensive K-12 education won top priority. “This was not just the usual ‘full funding’ cry,” reports Larry Seaquist. “The consensus was that we need our schools to get back to providing comprehensive education experiences, more than the math-science-reading-writing focus that has been produced by the combination of the WASL and budget squeezes.”

The second highest point winner was an idea from the Infrastructure group. A comprehensive infrastructure plan (for 21st century transportation, information technology, etc.) should be incorporated into local and state Comprehensive (land-use) Plans.

Third highest points went to a concept from the Health and Human Services group. Local volunteer Community Action Boards (concept already in State statute) should be constituted to set local priorities for spending, with prevention initiatives given special attention.

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In the final hour, each group reported to a panel of VIPs, including Representative Jan Angel; LWVT-PC President Terri Baker; TVW CEO Greg Lane; Senator Derek Kilmer; Clark Mather from Norm Dicks's office; Keri Rooney from Pat McCarthy's office; and Executive Director of Pierce County Library System Neel Parikh.

The groups did not just repeat the usual mantra of public wishes. Among other ideas, they offered the panel several more results-oriented plans for community action:

- Raise the level of volunteerism in school programs and in supporting public and private volunteer initiatives;
- Educate the public on issues of environmental sustainability;
- Increase government transparency and accessibility through establishing oversight board for bonds, re-orienting incentives for those on public assistance, shifting criminal justice toward prevention and rehabilitation, and improving the auditing process for government spending.

One purpose of the day was to test this method of finding community consensus. Participant evaluations were uniformly enthusiastic about the experience. LWVT-PC granted money from the Education Fund to produce video segments of this event. The League's event committee members, Liz Lathrop, Lucinda Wingard, and Dorothy Bremner, hope viewers will be inspired to stage this exercise throughout the county and state.



Community group proposes new, shared priorities for future

LARRY SEAQUIST, DOROTHY BREMNER,
LIZ LATHROP AND LUCINDA WINGARD
Special to the Gateway

“We are not as far apart as you might think.” That was one citizen’s take away from our recent exercise in community priority setting.

Co-sponsored by the Pierce County League of Women Voters, the Pierce County Executive, the City of Gig Harbor and the Peninsula School District, our Refreshing Democracy event gathered more than three-dozen local citizens on a recent Saturday at our new Boys and Girls Club.

Our challenge to the group: What should be this community’s key priorities as we dig our way out of this severe recession? There are many things we’d all like but budgets are shrinking. What must we do? Or more exactly, what can we agree could make the biggest difference in our long-term future? To explore the possibilities with fresh eyes, our guests put aside their own wide diversity of backgrounds, age and political persuasion by jumping into role-playing teams. Each team represented a different perspective on our community’s shared interests

The results, later briefed to a panel of VIP community leaders, included everything from education priorities to ways to cut government spending. Here are some of the ideas with the strongest support across all the teams:

Broaden education

The group’s single highest priority: “Fully fund K-12 education to ensure that our children graduate from high

school with a comprehensive educational experience.” Their recommendations: “Back away from a too narrow, test-driven emphasis on math and science so all of our kids enter adulthood and citizenship with a well-rounded start in life”; and “Make sure all kids enter grade school ready to learn. Expand kindergarten and other early learning opportunities for everyone, especially families struggling with financial problems in this recession.”

Cut the cost of social programs with better, local management and a prevention Orientation

The group generally agreed that no matter how important the program, the cost of government can and must come down. “Use a ‘Community Action Board’ to streamline state programs to local needs and cut duplication,” was one idea with broad support. Another consensus item was “Put more emphasis on prevention – we need a comprehensive overhaul of our public assistance incentives to help people move back into productive jobs.”

Improve planning

As they considered our needs for infrastructure – roads, bridges, libraries, clean water, firefighters, Internet connections, etc., one group hit on the need for better planning. “Our future, whole-community needs should be considered on a whole-community basis. We have a comprehensive land-use plan; we should also have a plan for the shared capabilities we’ll need in the decades ahead.”

We designed the Community Priorities exercise to steer clear of the tired old slogan-arguments between con-

servatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans. Instead, each of the teams spanned all of those perspectives as they looked for common concerns and hatched new ideas that all could support.

One team, designated Individual Responsibility, challenged everyone’s thinking with questions like, “Is that really a government function? Shouldn’t we citizens take responsibility for that?” And, “Is there a way that could be done better locally?” That “local leadership” idea came out several times. Over and over these citizens said they’d like to see control over spendy government programs kept as much as possible at the local level. The team influenced the others to consider cutting bureaucracy and improve results by tailoring government programs to each community’s specific needs.

Was the experience useful? The participants voted “Yes!”

“This was democracy in action,” said one.

“I’d love to see it expanded and even more people involved,” said another.

We hope to do that. This is a particularly difficult moment for all of us. Many businesses and families in our community struggle to survive this deep economic recession. Voters and taxpayers are trying to figure out what the appropriate level of government is. We believe that the more we citizens can find ways to work creatively together, the more certain we are to be on a path to a healthy future.

Larry Seaquist represents the 26th District in the state Legislature. Dorothy Bremner, Liz Lathrop and Lucinda Wingard, are Gig Harbor members of the non-partisan Pierce County League of Women Voters.

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Compilation of Remarks from the Participantsⁱ

Recommended Priorities

Education was the top priority, specifically:

1. Fund comprehensive K-12 education. Comprehensive is intended to include things like art, music, PE, sports, counseling, civics/citizenship, environmental stewardship, volunteerism, personal nutrition, personal financial management, creativity, and flexibility, as well as academics. With its emphasis on funding and comprehensiveness, this recommendation would cost more money to implement. However, most participants believe comprehensive education is a long-term cost-saving strategy, which will negate later costs in social services, criminal justice, and environmental clean-up.
2. Be sure that students are ready to learn, which means:
 - Helping young children to be school-ready. This recommendation would cost more than the schools spend now if the state and local school boards were to assume the responsibility for early childhood education.
 - Ensuring adequate preparation and school-readiness of students for each grade level.
3. Encourage volunteerism by students and all citizens, which will bolster local responsibility and help to reduce costs for both publicly and privately funded services.
4. Educate everybody on environmental sustainability, which is necessary for people to behave in concert with the environment. A cost-saving benefit will be the reduced expense for cleaning up messes.
5. Bridge K-12 students to education for actual potential jobs; prepare people for careers we don't have descriptions for yet. This approach will reduce wasted effort and expense in preparing for jobs that won't exist in the future.

Recommendations to **improve government systems and reduce government expenditures**:

1. Improve our community's comprehensive land use plan; integrate predictable technology likely to change how we travel, communicate, access learning and jobs, etc. Science-based "best practices" are a moving target; regulations and regulatory bodies must be more flexible. Note that current plans are weak in implementation and enforcement. Since our common resources need to be protected by government through laws and regulation, environmental stewardship needs a strong plank in the plan.
2. Re-orient incentives for those on public assistance; e.g., institute graduated unemployment insurance based on income level so that benefit recipients are not penalized for working; better define eligibility for Health and Human Services; examine local evidence of government program benefits.
3. Re-direct money spent on prisons to prevention and rehabilitation; look at sentencing guidelines and drug laws; work with educators for education within the prisons.
4. Re-set framework (e.g., contracts) of public employment.

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Structures that give citizens **Local Control and Responsibility**:

1. Expand the community action board that is statutorily required for Health/Human Services. The expanded scope would have local citizens and agencies from Gig Harbor/Key Peninsula assessing all of community's needs and matching them with locally-based, public and private prevention, services, and solutions. Examples of subjects that would fall under the board's purview: school-ready children; non-duplication of services; shared use of public and private facilities.
2. Create a bond oversight board, especially since 96% of infrastructure's funding is from bonds. The board can be modeled on the existing Public Works Board. Although this recommendation addresses a specific case of bureaucracy relying on modern complexity to shut out the public when issuing bonds, several teams stressed that government agencies must have transparent and accessible regulations and budgets.
3. Network all agencies and organizations for environmental action and educate everybody on sustainability so that local action is informed.

Miscellaneous Ideas

So participants' input will not be lost, the following ideas are included here.

About the Budget:

Revenue

- The discussion skirted the budget crisis question.
- We can't have government on the cheap; need to pay for our expertise, for quality government. The state government budget is in crisis; we cannot continue funding government on the backs of people who buy things, who are unemployed. We have to learn how to get out of our regressive tax system.
- People feel overtaxed, which negatively affects the outcomes for the local taxing districts.
- User fees are appropriate for infrastructure, with equity between counties
- Funds can be received from selling or recycling the autos confiscated on the third DUI offense.

Cost-saving ideas:

- Streamline/un-duplicate services
- Make court system more efficient
- Emphasize community policing; e.g., neighborhood watch, telephone tree
- Have individuals pay restoration costs if they degrade the environment.
- Examine debt limit
- Improve the auditing process for government spending
- Re-draw county lines to better align planning for areas with similar needs

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Personal Responsibility Team's cost-saving ideas:

- Make families, not schools, responsible for meals and pre-school care
- More government audits
- Greater citizen education
- More efficient government
- Outcomes-based services
- Clarify government expectations; define and stick only to the basic purpose of each program
- Do not support unproductive behavior – too much education, welfare
- Reduce influence of special interest groups and unions.

From evaluations and interviews:

- DSSH workers need to be culturally competent
- I favor the European apprentice system; i.e., students complete their formal education by grade 8 and then enter a 3-year apprenticeship program to train for jobs.
- Need required parenting class, as research tells us that children learn 50% of all they learn during the first six years of life.

Suggestions for Followup

Participants did not have time to (1) address their second question, “What actions should be taken now to put revenue and spending in line with economic realities?” and (2) develop action plans.

Followup ideas from the evaluations include:

- Duplicate the process. Spend the last session to put together action plans to be used.
- Count the number of service organizations in our community – 36 I know of. Thank them for service. Invite them to next meeting with public officials. Listen to them.
- I thought this was a great opportunity and I would love to expand it into a town hall style to get more people involved inside and outside the legislature.
- People need to know where to go if they want to join the action.
- Maybe small monthly meetings at a local restaurant, hall, etc.
- Through neighborhood councils? Local library sponsorship.
- Community action boards' scope to include implementation.
- Consider a format to discuss how to restore confidence in government.
- Get the local newspaper to tout this event and parlay that to another session.
- Use social media, local newspapers, community meetings to solicit input.
- Communities need to invite their citizens to participate – the noisier the better.
- We need a regular, open opportunity for all interested citizens to express their priorities and needs.

ⁱ Based on end-of-day reports, session's video tapes, and participants' notes and evaluations.

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Conducting the Community Priorities Exercise

Would We Do This Again? Yes

One of the purposes of the Community Priorities Exercise was to test this method for reaching community consensus. The LWV of Tacoma-Pierce County would do it again, incorporating the following changes:

- Seek/Encourage a more diverse group – covering philosophies, youth, backgrounds.
- Pose more pointed discussion questions so the group addresses the budget crisis.
- Shift time spent on ranking to an Action session in which people (a) move out of role-playing into their personal beliefs roles and (b) develop real-life action plans.
- Incorporate a shorthand version of ranking into the evaluation sheets.

Personnel

Anyone conducting the Exercise needs:

- Moderator(s) for the process. We had Rep. Larry Seaquist and Dr. Joe Bell.
- Speaker to introduce the budget and issues. Rep. Seaquist used effective and succinct power point slides to weave the material into his role-player's "charge" to each team.
- Assistant(s) to keep the materials and logistics moving. We had Oriana Futrell, Legislative Assistant to Rep. Seaquist.

Materials

1. General Invitation to the June 12, 2010 Community Priorities Exercise
2. Agenda for the June 12, 2010 Community Priorities Exercise
3. Role-Playing Teams: Their Scope

Video

A 30-minute video demonstrating the exercise's process will be available by November 2010. To request a copy, e-mail the LWV of Tacoma-Pierce County at tacomalwv3@juno.com.

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Community Sponsors



League of
Women
Voters



Pierce County



City of Gig
Harbor



Peninsula
School
District

You have been identified as one of our community leaders with a broad perspective on our needs and priorities. We invite you to participate in a special community planning exercise on **June 12th**. You will join about 40 other community leaders drawn from many different professions and backgrounds across our Gig Harbor and Key Peninsula region. Our goal is to answer two questions from a broad, community-wide perspective:

- *Looking ahead from the bottom of this severe recession, what are our key state and local government priorities?*
 - *What actions should be taken now to put revenue and spending in line with economic realities?*
- (Note: we will look at all levels of government: state and local.)*

This will not be dull! To explore these questions and identify possible outcomes, we will engage you in a fast-paced role-playing simulation. The goal: a set of practical priorities and a "must do now" action plan. We are confident you will find the day stimulating and productive.

To remind:

Refreshing Democracy- A Community Priorities Exercise
Saturday June 12th

Check in at 8:30, Exercise begins promptly at 9:00

The Boys and Girls Club
8502 Skansie Ave
Gig Harbor, WA 98332

Please confirm your attendance by contacting Oriana Futrell at **(253) 858-1013** or by email at Futrell.orian@leg.wa.gov. We will send a reminder a few days before the exercise. Refreshments and a working lunch will be served; **we ask that you contribute \$ 10 for the cost of food** as we're doing this as volunteers working on a shoestring.

Thank you, we look forward to seeing you on the 12th.

Presented by
The League of Women Voters & Representative Larry Seaquist

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Saturday, June 12th – Gig Harbor Boys & Girls Club

Final 6/10

Agenda:

8:30	Check-in		<i>Morning refreshments</i>
9:00	Kickoff	Welcome & self introductions Team roles & issues overview Team Instructions	<i>Co-sponsors, host Larry Seaquist Moderator</i>
9:30	MOVE 1	Team discussion 1) <i>Who are you? Friends? Opponents?</i> 2) <i>How have state/local budget & tax problems affected you?</i> 3) <i>How will you know when you are thriving again?</i>	<i>Choose spokesperson Moderated discussion using discussion guide</i>
10:30	PLENARY	Team presentations (5 min. ea.) Cross-team questions	<i>Team spokespersons</i>
11:00	MOVE 2	Team discussion 1) <i>Having heard others' perspectives, what are your 2 main goals?</i> 2) <i>Can you enlist other groups in a coalition?</i>	<i>Moderated discussion using discussion guide</i>
12:00	---	<i>Working lunch</i>	<i>Pick up lunch, continue</i>
12:45	PLENARY	Team presentations (5 min. ea.) Cross-team questions, "5-finger" vote	<i>Team spokespersons</i>
1:30	MOVE 3	Team discussion 1) <i>Knowing what you now know, what are your group's 1 or 2 "must do now" actions?</i> 2) <i>How will you know you are being successful? (Or failing?)</i>	<i>Moderated discussion using discussion guide</i>
2:00	GUESTS	<i>VIP guest officials arrive</i>	<i>Introduction</i>
2:05	SUMMARY & PRESS CONF.	Team presentations Q&A from visiting officials and press	<i>Spokespersons & teams VIP & Press guests</i>
2:50	Wrap up	Take away comments	<i>Participants</i>
3:00	Conclude	<i>Thank you!</i>	

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Role-Playing Teams: Their Scope

Public Infrastructure Team – You have a stake in one or more of the following current state and local budget items:

Road, Rail, Air and Water Transport systems
Port system
Energy production and delivery systems, green energy
Libraries
Parks
Economic development initiatives and incentives
Funding, governance and taxing bodies

Education Team – You have a stake in one or more of the following current state and local budget items:

Birth – Age 4
K-12
Community & Technical Colleges; adult education; jobs retraining
4-year higher education institutions
Education of juveniles incarcerated in juvenile rehab and prisons
Education of adult prisoners
Governance and taxing bodies

Human Services Team – You have a stake in one or more of the following current state and local budget items:

Health, including Medicaid, medical services for those not qualified for Medicaid, children's health programs, mental health services, alcohol and substance abuse programs
Long-term care for the elderly, including nursing and boarding homes, home care assistance, community services, Adult Protective Services
Assistance to the needy
Refugee and Immigrant assistance
Developmental disabilities services
Children and family services for child protection, domestic violence, foster care, adoption and guardianship, and family reunification
Vocational rehabilitation programs to help individuals with disabilities find and maintain work
Contracted non-profit human service agencies
Governance bodies

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Public Safety Team –

You have a stake in one or more of the following current state and local budget items:

- Juvenile offenders and status offenders
- Corrections, including state institutions and parole and county jails
- Emergency preparedness
- State and county law enforcement (police and sheriffs)
- Fire protection
- State, superior, county and municipal courts
- Governance and taxing bodies

Natural Resource Management Team – You have a stake in one or more of the following current state and local budget items:

- Waste management
- Water quality protection
- Biodiversity protection
- Building and land use planning and regulation
- Environmental regulation
- Climate change
- Recreation
- Parks
- Conservation districts
- Property rights
- Governance and taxing bodies

Personal Responsibility Team –

You have a stake in current state and local budget items being discussed by each of the other groups. Your point of view is that:

- Government is too big
- Government is too controlling
- Government spending is wasteful
- Citizens are self-reliant
- Citizens can and should take responsibility.