

# COUNTY GOVERNMENT

## ***Support for reform of county government in Oklahoma***

The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVOK) believes that changes are needed in the operation and management of county government in Oklahoma, to achieve a government that is more efficient, modern and accountable to the people.

The LWVOK favors a commissioner form of county government, but feels that it may not be suitable for all counties. The option of home rule should be extended to all counties, permitting them to determine their own form of government.

The LWVOK believes that, under the commission form of county government, commissioners should serve as policy makers concerned with the entire county, not individual districts. Commissioners should be elected at-large from districts in which they reside, with a county manager hired to carry out administrative responsibilities.

County administrative offices should be consolidated. Appointed or hired officers should be under the supervision of the county manager. The LWVOK continues to support elimination of the office of County Superintendent of Schools.

Greater efficiency and economy in county government would be achieved through use of city-county cooperation or consolidation of services such as in planning, solid waste disposal, libraries, health departments, and emergency medical services. Inter-county use of data processing and police technical services should be encouraged. The LWVOK recommends employing a county road superintendent and centralizing the use of road equipment. Laws pertaining to county government must be re-codified in order to make them easier to locate and understand.

The LWVOK believes that the ad valorem tax should continue to be the primary source of revenue for county government. However, equalization of ad valorem taxes and consistency in assessment practices must be pursued to support county needs. Counties also need greater flexibility in raising revenue. The LWVOK supports legislation permitting an increase in the millage levy for counties. County treasurers should be required to invest county funds in interest-bearing accounts for highest and best use of the funds. Un-earmarking the transfer funds used for road maintenance would better serve the entire county. Annual unscheduled audits of county funds should be conducted.

The LWVOK does not believe a separate code of ethics for county officers is needed. The current oath of office, if enforced, is sufficient. The oath could be strengthened by inclusion of stronger penalties for violation and a requirement for disclosure of any conflict of interest.

Consensus approved 1983

## **BACKGROUND**

The LWVOK, at its 1981 Convention, received a request from the delegates for approval and coordination assistance from the State Board for a statewide ad hoc committee to develop a program study on county government. The decision was well timed; it was that year a county commission scandal erupted, focusing attention once more on the need for modernization to insure better government at the county level.

At the 1982 LWVOK Council, the actual study of county government was adopted and resulted in the consensus that was approved at the 1983 convention.

In the years since federal prosecutors sent commissioners in nearly all counties to prison, little actual reform in county government has taken place. Public interest in and attention to the operations of county government faded in the wake of Oklahoma's fiscal problems of the 1980's. The Oklahoma Legislature did enact some cosmetic changes regarding purchasing procedures as well as accounting practices to provide a better paper trail in tracking money spent by county officials. Commissioners were also encouraged to make better use of the open meeting law in conducting business.

Information received from the U.S. Attorney in 1989 shows that states adopting systems similar to home rule have reported considerable savings and increased efficiency. Suppliers who serve northern Oklahoma and Kansas report more corrupt business practices in Oklahoma than in Kansas.

Any significant modernization or reform of county government is still waiting.

5/12/99