President’s Report
The Erie County League of Women Voters was christened at the May 27, 1919, annual luncheon of the Erie County Women’s Suffrage Party, according to an article in the Buffalo Enquirer newspaper on May 28, 1919. Miss Elizabeth Olmstead, chairman of the Erie County League of Women Voters, introduced the speakers at the luncheon at the Hotel Lafayette with about 350 attendees.

Today, we continue the work they began and, regrettably, there is much still to be accomplished. While we celebrate recent laws in New York State to insure voting rights, there are attacks and voter suppression in other parts of the nation. Women have yet to receive equal pay with men and recently there are increased efforts to limit women’s reproductive health decisions in many states.

I cannot give Lyle Toohey enough thanks for volunteering to chair the Women Suffrage Celebration Committee this year. She and the committee planned and hosted a glorious cocktail party to celebrate 100 years of the League of Women Voters of New York State at the Garret Club. An Afternoon with Eleanor was a huge success. Be ready for another very special event in 2020 as we celebrate 100 years of the League of Women Voters of the United States and the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gave the right to vote to all women citizens in the nation. We welcome new committee members to help plan the celebration.

LWVBN once again has a seat at the table on the West Valley Citizens Task Force. Lee Lambert and I had been looking for someone to replace her for several years before Lee retired in 2015. Recently, we’ve been pleased that Barbara Frackiewicz was attending meetings as an alternate for another organization, but it wasn’t until we learned that Pat Townsend was also attending meetings and was willing to officially join the task force in the League’s name that we had an official League representative approved by the Task Force. Pat is an able successor to Lee.

We gave special acknowledgment to the four members of the board who elected not to accept another term at the May board meeting. Mary Herbst has been an outstanding board secretary. She kept accurate minutes of board meetings and sent get well and condolence cards to League members for four years. Ann Converso presented a meaningful Citizens Lobbying Workshop in February as Advocacy Chair. Her wide experience and friendly and informal manner made the morning not only useful but fun. Janet Massaro has contributed much to the board and as Membership Chair. It’s a challenge when many members are quite elderly. While we lose folks who decide they can no longer support the League, Janet has led the effort to not only sustain membership numbers but have them increase during the past two years. Janet Zehr was a board member for only one year, but was very helpful when we needed to amend the bylaws this year. It’s good to know that these special women will continue to be active League members.

Board members: Margaret Brunson, Ann Converso, Pat Costanzo (on leave), Nancy DeTine, Marian Deutschman, Ramona Gallagher, Mary Herbst, Shirley Joy, Janet Massaro, Nora Mikes, Lori Robinson, Joan Simmons, Liz Zausmer, Janet Zehr and Terri Parks, president

Voter Service
The summer of 2018 was extremely busy for the League of Women Voters of Buffalo Niagara. Small groups of League members and friends carried clipboards with voter registration forms attached to festivals and events in our region to register new voters and to remind everyone that it’s important to vote every year. In 2018, we conducted voter registration efforts at 33 different sites. We registered 340 people and talked to many hundreds more. We reached out to colleges and high schools more than in the past. There were 50 people, mostly League members, who volunteered their services in this effort. Certainly, their efforts impacted the increased turnout of voters in Erie and Niagara Counties.

The League conducted candidates’ forums in East Aurora and Amherst in October 2018 and provided the moderator and timekeeper for the forum at the Amherst Senior Center. We provided the moderators and timekeepers for four school board candidate forums this spring. We also provided speakers at two events last fall. We acknowledge with many thanks the outstanding work that Mike Egan provided to make sure we had able League volunteers for these important efforts.

Voter Registration Team members: Janet Goodsell, Linda Koeningsberg, Joan Simmons, Lee Tetkowski, Kathy Elias, Michelle Perkins, Sara Vernon, Barb Gunderson Kathie Macaluso, Melissa
Naturalization Ceremonies

During the months of June 2018 through May 2019, a total of 68 volunteers represented the League at 34 naturalization ceremonies at 13 different sites: U.S. District Courthouse, Buffalo History Museum, International Institute, Buffalo & Erie County Naval & Military Park, ECC North, Burchfield Penney Art Center, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Hamburg Middle School, Key Bank Center/Lexus Club, Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site, West Seneca West High School, and Buffalo & Erie County Botanical Gardens.

Our new partnership with the Erie County Board of Elections has proved very effective in registering new citizens. We especially appreciate the assistance of Bob Hellwitz of the Board of Elections, who has been instrumental in helping to achieve 95%-100% return of new citizen voter registration forms.

*Patricia Wille, Volunteer Coordinator for Naturalization Ceremonies*

Local Government Committee

We discontinued monitoring the activities of the Erie County Citizens’ Budget Review Commission once they discontinued posting agendas or minutes of meetings for 2018. We will attend county budget hearings if there is a major controversy. After our program on gentrification and displacement, we had a wide-ranging discussion of the possibilities for our next focus. We are interested in voter turnout, voter suppression, and voting rights. We explored collaboration with the Money in Politics Committee and had Janet Massaro bring us up to date on the work of that committee. We read and discussed a book by Eric Liu titled “You’re More Powerful than you Think.” We researched what Leagues in other states have done about redistricting and gerrymandering. Dr. Lisa Parshall, faculty member at Daemen College and coordinator the Vote Smart program, joined our committee and presented a program on her research and the new localism movement. Because of the passage of election reforms in New York State, we decided to plan a program in the fall on the implementation and anticipated impact of these changes. The program will include a local panel and a keynote speaker from the Brennan Center who will focus on threats to our democracy through interference in voting processes.

*Committee: Dot Brown, Nancy DeTine, Kathleen McCarthy, Nora Mikes, Arlene Miles, Joan Simmons, Lynda Stephens, Lisa Parshall, Lynne Vallone and Marian Deutschman, Chair*

Program, Issues and Action Committee

Representatives from the program committees form the Program, Issues and Action Committee. We welcome other League members to help us plan League programs. Committee chairs distribute summaries of their committee meetings to the Program/Issues Committee and to the board. Our role is to discuss and recommend approval of program events and actions proposed by those committees and other League members. Based on our recommendations, the board decides whether to grant approval or denial. Most actions are in the form of letters to media or elected officials and must conform to League positions. Our president keeps us informed of program items for LWVNYS, LWVUS and conventions. In its role as a clearinghouse for programs, this committee was involved in the League hosting or co-sponsoring a wide array of meetings.

Our summer picnic in July featured Michelle Urbanczyk, CEO of the new Explore & More Children’s Museum at Canalside. Our kickoff on October 1 titled “Can Our Damaged Democracy be Repaired?” was planned by Lynda Stephens and others and held at the Theodore Roosevelt site with a panel of political science faculty members including Dr. James Campbell, SUNYAB; Dr. Peter Yacobucci, SUNY Buffalo State; and Dr. Jamie Pimlott, Niagara University. On October 12, Eva Hassett, executive director of the International Institute, spoke about “Immigrants and Refugees: Good News for the Buffalo and New York State Economy” at the Scotch ’n Sirloin Restaurant. Our November program featured Bob McCarthy, political reporter from the Buffalo News, and Jim Heaney from the Investigative Post, on Post-Election Perspectives. The December 1 holiday party at Rizotto’s Restaurant featured GObike Buffalo as the benefitting charity and speaker Justin Booth presented the mission and goals of this organization. Our January lunch program presenter was the dynamic Karen Davis, senior consumer fraud representative for the New York State Office of the Attorney General. Ann Converso presented a very effective Citizens Lobbying Workshop on February 9
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at the Harlem Road Community Center. For Black History Month, Eva Doyle was the February 15 luncheon speaker on “WNY’s Place in Black History.” The March 30 program planned by the Money in Politics Committee at the Harlem Road Community Center included the documentary film “Dark Money” followed by discussion. The Waterfront Committee planned the April 12 meeting that featured Greg Stevens, executive director of Niagara Greenway, who spoke about “How the Niagara Greenway Connects with the Outer Harbor.” The lovely May 4 cocktail party took place at the Garret Club. It was arranged by the Suffrage Celebration Committee, in recognition of the centennial of the LWVNYS, with Denise Reichard re-enacting Eleanor Roosevelt.

Committee: Ann Converso, Gladys Gifford, Janet Massaro, JoAnn Mecca, Nora Mikes, Terri Parks, Lynda Stephens and Marian Deutschman, Chair

Communication and Public Relations
This committee achieved a great deal in 2019. Thanks to our extremely talented volunteer designer, Krysta Doerfler, we have produced professionally designed flyers and programs for all League events, and are updating our membership brochure. Thanks to the ongoing efforts of Terri Parks, layout editor, the Voter has been executed beautifully, and then mailed to members who request a hard copy by Sally Metzger. Thanks to webmaster, Nora Mikes, our website is always completely current.

Thanks to Michelle Perkins, our Facebook page is abuzz with activity – interesting, timely and relevant posts are attracting new followers, comments and "likes." We also use posts to encourage member and non-member participation in action items initiated by the state and national Leagues. In addition to posting events with links to our website, we purchase Facebook ads to promote them to a broader audience. Finally, our list of media contacts has been significantly expanded, and press releases about League events are distributed regularly throughout the community.

Nancy DeTine, Chair

Waterfront Committee
In 2018-2019, the Waterfront Committee met four times at the Central Library cafe area in downtown Buffalo. Meetings were held from 3:00 to 4:00 pm. Our group included representatives from the 21st Century Park on the Outer Harbor.

We continued to review the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation (ECHDC) activities concerning the Outer Harbor. JoAnn Mecca continued to represent us at the ECHDC board meetings. The agenda of each meeting is now available for the public to review, at the Empire State Development website.

The ECHDC held three listening sessions – July 11, November 19, May 2 – at which consultants’ proposals were offered for development to encourage public activities on the Outer Harbor. We attended, and took part in the surveys offered by the ECHDC.

We joined in supporting the Common Council’s vote in October to enact the Local Waterfront Revitalization Area document, which balances development interests with matters such as public access and environmental protection.

We planned the April 12 Lunch & Issues event, which featured Greg Stevens, executive director of the Niagara Greenway, as speaker. Held at Scotch 'n Sirloin, Amherst, the event attracted 32 people and educated us all about the connections all along the Buffalo-Niagara waterfront, including the Outer Harbor.

The committee continues to raise awareness of the contaminated soil at the Outer Harbor, and will press elected officials to make serious efforts to ensure environmental protections are in place for everyone, including wildlife and water. We maintain an email contact list of 40 people.

Committee: James Carr (21st Century Park), Nancy DeTine, Barb Frackiewicz, Ellen Gibson, Janet Goodsell, Joanne Kahn, Beth Kauffman, Janet Massaro, JoAnn Mecca, Nora Mikes, Lynda Stephens, Joyce Zobel and Gladys Gifford, Chair

Membership Committee
This was a banner year for LWVBN membership. We reported a total of 230 members to the national League in January. We have continued to add new members since then, many expressing their eagerness to join in our Voter Service activities. What better way to learn about League than by registering voters and making sure they get to the polls on Election Day! The challenge for any membership committee is to make sure members return year after year to keep the League vibrant and strong. We contact prospective members, greet...
members and nonmembers at League meetings and – yes – remind members of their financial commitments. We give a special thanks to Mary Ann Turkla in the League office who is our primary connection to League members. Mary Ann keeps all the records always with a sharp eye on the calendar. She makes sure everything runs smoothly so that we all look good. We are truly grateful.

Members: Judy Metzger, Lois Uhteg, Sally Metzger, Judy Weidemann and Janet Massaro, Chair

Money In Politics Committee
The Money In Politics Committee (MIP) meets monthly to study, discuss and take action on the good government issues of campaign finance reform, election law reform, and redistricting at national, state and local levels. We regularly send updates on MIP topics to members who request them and to all members through articles in the Voter. On March 30, we prepared an afternoon program, “Money Talks,” for League members and the community. We viewed the award-winning documentary, “Dark Money,” which used the state of Montana to show how money corrupted local elected officials and candidates, the dysfunction of the government’s watchdog, the Federal Election Commission, and the crucial role that a free press plays in our democracy. The lively discussion that followed left no doubt that the corrupting influence of money in politics remains a topic of great public concern.

MIP members who helped with the program:
Janet Goodsell, Janet Lenichek, Laura McDade, BethKauffman, JoAnn Mecca, Alberta Roman, Liz Zausmer, and Janet Massaro, Chair.

Active committee members also include: Barb Brooks, Shirley Joy, Jennifer Hoffman, Christine Reichmuth, Helen Mayo, Peter Neal, and Margie Boyce

Election Services Committee
The Election Services Committee has two functions: we conduct nominations and elections at various housing sites managed by the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) and, every two years, we conduct the city-wide BMHA resident commissioner elections. The site elections are mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Each site can have its own Resident Council, which can work for the betterment of its residents. Our responsibility is to be the neutral third party that ensures that all of these elections are conducted in a fair and timely manner.

We work within the directives of a three-year contract with BMHA that was most recently signed in March 2018.

From May 2018 through May 2019, the committee conducted elections at 18 BMHA sites. The usual procedure is that we meet twice at each site. The first meeting is to conduct nominations and the second is when we conduct the actual election. We prepare mailings to inform each housing site resident of both the nomination and election meetings.

This committee functions only because of the dedication, caring, and willingness of the group to work together to accomplish our mission. We acknowledge the committee members in each edition of the Voter, but I’d like to give special recognition to Nora Mikes who has assumed leadership for many of the site election efforts this year.

Alan Dozoretz, Election Services Chair

LWVBN Web Page Report
The total number of visits to the LWVBN web site, lwvbn.org, from May 2018 through April 2019 was 26,534, a slight decrease from 2018. The peak months for visits were September, October, and November, reflecting interest in election information available during these months. Web traffic statistics for the past five years are given below.

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Nora Mikes and Kristin Allen, LWVBN Webmasters

Education Committee
Our members attended a presentation by New York State Commissioner of Education, MaryEllen Elia, at UB North Campus on May 1 on “The State of the State in Education”. Dr. Elia supports funding equity throughout the state, and is a strong supporter of public education for three year olds through 20 year
olds with a holistic approach including social and emotional resources.

We have focused on ways to improve reading and basic skills of Buffalo city students including ways to reduce absenteeism. This led us to learn about mentoring programs for students - Catholic Charities, Boces Literacy Zone, the Adult Education Division of the Buffalo Public Schools, and the Northland Workforce Training Center.

The Northland Workforce Training Center was established by Governor Cuomo to prepare citizens to work in advanced manufacturing. It has been offering training for high school graduates to prepare them for the needed workforce. After learning about them, we plan to visit their facilities.

Since all these issues are connected to a core of poverty, unstable homes, substance abuse, and exposure to violence, we continue to turn again and again to the importance of starting wholesome education earlier and earlier. We are following the growth of pre-Kindergarten for all in New York City, and the development throughout the state of better training for those who are working in early childhood.

We continue to monitor Charter Schools. The charter school industry is pushing to increase the number of charter schools in New York State, from its present limit of 460, without requiring any reforms or increased transparency. Charters do not serve a comparable number of English language learners or students with disabilities, and continue to drain funds from traditional public schools. Locally Enterprise and Westminster Community charter schools were recommended for three-year renewals but the state Board of Regents has expressed concern about their academic success. We note that the New York State Attorney General, Letita James, strongly supports public schools. We are watching the U. S. House’s recent vote to increase funding for programs like Title 1 while cutting $100 million from Betsy DeVos’s Charter Schools Program budget to start new charter schools and spread charter chains. The U. S. Senate has not yet made its decisions on federal education funding.

We attended a candidates night for Buffalo School Board. JoAnn Mecca was time keeper at that event.

“Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.”

Author Unknown

We sincerely thank our League volunteers for their continuing service to democracy.

We welcome new members for each of our League efforts at any time. Most committee meetings are noted in the Voter. If you read about anything that interests you in the Annual Report, you may contact the committee chair and offer your service. You will be warmly welcomed.

We strive to reach out to members based on their responses to the annual membership survey that we send with membership renewals each year. It is important that you complete it each year, because your interests may change.

We have recognized the women and men who have volunteered for the League for the past three years. In 2018, there were 121 different people who helped with our work. Many of them worked in many areas and in efforts that involved countless hours of service.

The board of directors is developing an ambitious plan to increase voter participation in Erie and Niagara counties in the next two years. Its success depends on the work of all of us. Please read your Voter each month for more details and offer your assistance.

Members: Marian Deutschman, Maxine Insera, Marlene Katzel, JoAnn Mecca, Nora Mikes, and Lee Tetkowski and Dorothy Tao, co-chairs