

The LWVC Opposes Prop 92: Time to Stop Digging!

The League of Women Voters of California opposes Proposition 92, the community college governance and funding measure on the February 2008 ballot.

In light of the League's support for a community college system with sufficient resources to offer all Californians access to a quality higher education, some may ask why the League would oppose a measure that could increase funding and reinforce the college system's governance structure. Perhaps the simplest explanation is the adage that says, "If you are in a hole, stop digging."

California has dug itself into a budget hole with what appears to be a permanent structural deficit, in which expenditures continue to exceed revenues. Unless significant changes are made, we will continue to find ourselves papering over shortfalls, even in relatively good years, and making painful cuts or going further into debt in bad years.

Our current revenue structure does not allow us to maintain the current level of services provided by existing programs, meet growing infrastructure needs, and improve some services that Californians desire. Any suggestion of either raising rates on existing taxes or adding new ones faces a determined minority in the legislature that denies the necessary two-thirds vote for passage.

Some ballot measures on popular issues have succeeded in securing new revenues for specific programs, such as tobacco taxes for early childhood development programs and, more recently, higher taxes on upper-income taxpayers for new mental health programs. These, however, typically mandate that spending be used only for new or expanded programs, not to replace existing funding in those areas. This can have the perverse effect of causing existing programs to be cut back even as new ones are started.

Other measures, like Proposition 98 (which guarantees that K-14 education will receive about 40 percent of the General Fund) and Proposition 49 (which guarantees funding for after-school programs), mandate spending without adding any new revenues.

Proposition 98 and payment on the state debt must be paid for before any other expenditures, and the newest bond measures, added to the deficit financing bonds passed in 2004, have driven up the level of debt service. Add in all the other ballot measures that have created or expanded programs without paying for them, and there is very little money left in the General Fund for discretionary spending. In contrast, the League's positions on state and local government finance demand that we give preference to measures that increase the flexibility of the system, rather than tie the hands of legislators and the Governor even more when dealing with a difficult budget situation.

The end result is that any new required spending is likely to come from cuts to some existing program. Experience has taught us that those cuts are most likely to fall on programs for health or welfare, which so far have seldom had financial backers who could qualify and win ballot measure campaigns to protect their funding.

The LWVC has positions that clearly support better funding for a variety of programs, including the community colleges. But if those programs are entitled to a slice of the budget, we can be certain it will be at the expense of other programs we also support.

We strongly support California's community colleges, and we agree that there is need for systemic reform. However, we do not believe that Proposition 92 is the way to address these needs.

Proposition 92 not only would mandate increased spending without regard for the overall state budget situation and without adding a new revenue source, but it also requires a cut in community college fees, even though they are low compared to other similar college systems and are waived for students with financial need. The basic problem is that we cannot support even more ballot-box budgeting without knowing what the real tradeoffs will be and who will ultimately bear the costs. ★