

THE LEAGUE CONSENSUS MEETING: REACHING MEMBER AGREEMENT

(a companion piece to "Dimensions of a Local League Study" distributed January 2000)

Before League can take action, members must agree in broad terms on what they think about the various aspects of a public policy issue – the League position. One of two methods to determine member agreement is the consensus process: **CONSENSUS IS A PROCESS WHEREBY MEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN A GROUP DISCUSSION OF AN ISSUE.** The accord reached by the group is not a simple majority, nor unanimity, but rather the overall sense of the group. It is a dynamic process – the discussion evokes an exchange of ideas, areas of agreement evolve and opinions crystallize.

When conducting a state or national League study, the local League board and study committee should follow these guidelines on how to conduct a consensus meeting, forwarding their League's consensus results to state or national as appropriate. The determination and announcement of the state or national League's consensus and position is determined at the state or national level as appropriate. The local League board is responsible for local League studies.

PRIOR TO THE CONSENSUS MEETING

- ✓ The local League Board has the overall responsibility for determining the member agreement process.
- ✓ The League Board and the study committee should determine how to maximize member participation. Easy access and convenience are key.
 - Scheduling several meetings at a variety of times may be helpful.
 - *VOTER* tear-offs, phone or e-mail responses may be appropriate to augment the consensus meeting.
- ✓ The study committee should educate members throughout the course of the study, so members attend informed, and should develop a concise consensus presentation.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE MEETING? It is a privilege of League membership to participate in the member agreement process. Non-members are welcome and encouraged to participate in the education phase – use a study as a membership tool and ask non-members to join – but not in the consensus discussion. Members of the study committee who are not members of the League may answer questions of clarification.

THE MECHANICS OF THE CONSENSUS MEETING

- ✓ Create an atmosphere of trust. Nonpartisanship, balanced and unbiased study material and consensus questions are essential.
- ✓ Plan a presentation that allows for adequate time to discuss all the questions. Social time at the beginning of the meeting creates a congenial atmosphere for the discussion.
- ✓ Design "lap packs" – short, concise handouts -- that facilitate discussion.
- ✓ Plan a "dress rehearsal" with the discussion leader and recorder(s).

ROLE OF THE DISCUSSION LEADER AND RECORDER

- ✓ *The discussion leader is a neutral – unbiased – facilitator.*
 - Encourages the exchange of all points of view;
 - Guides the group through their discussion.
 - Discourages domination of one member(s).
 - Listens carefully to discern member agreement, recapitulating tentative areas of agreement and/or recognizing where agreements are not met.
 - Keeps the discussion focused and on task.

(OVER)

- ✓ *The recorder is neutral and unbiased, taking notes that include:*
 - areas of agreement, disagreement, or undecided;
 - minority views and the strength of the minority;
 - participating members and non-members.
- ✓ Neither the discussion leader nor the recorder participates in the discussion.
- ✓ Both the discussion leader and the recorder may be invited to the committee meeting to help write the position.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE STUDY COMMITTEE DURING THE CONSENSUS DISCUSSION? The study committee presents all sides of the issue with equal emphasis to avoid biasing the consensus. It is advisable that the study committee members not participate in the consensus meeting. They will be viewed as experts and their opinions are likely to be well developed during the course of their research: they may be overly influential. The committee's role at the meeting is to clarify points, answer questions or describe the consequences of different decisions. The consensus of the committee members can be taken separately and incorporated into the position as it is written. If the study committee members do participate in the consensus discussion, their role must be made clear; they should only participate in one discussion, if a League is holding multiple meetings.

THE POSITION STATEMENT

- ✓ The study committee evaluates whether agreement has been reached and drafts a position statement.
- ✓ The position statement -
 - articulates the broad areas of agreement, including what the group supports and opposes;
 - should be broad enough to allow league to initiate, support or oppose a variety of proposals over a period of time;
 - does not contain minority views;
 - does not contain areas where agreement is not reached.
- ✓ It is common not to reach agreement on every aspect of a study.
- ✓ The Board judges whether there is substantial agreement among the membership as a whole and, if the answer is yes, adopts the position.

WHAT IF MEMBER PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSENSUS PROCESS IS LOW? Consensus is not a simple majority; there are no set rules as to what represents member agreement. League boards often look for super majorities in terms of the number of members participating. Historical levels of involvement should also be considered. If the Board determines that the participation in the process was too low or skewed to one area (for example: all urban, no rural Leagues), they have several choices. Boards may decide to continue the process, by holding additional meetings or by submitting a position statement for concurrence. Boards may also decide that a consensus has not been reached and discontinue the process.

WHAT'S NEXT? ACTION!

- ✓ The Board announces the new position to their membership and to the public.
- ✓ The study committee evolves into an action committee.
 - Develops potential action strategies to implement the position

For further or more detailed information, see:

- *In League*, available from LWVUS
- *Empowering Citizens: A Guide to Influencing Public Policy*, available from LWVUS
- *Planning Program: From Choice Through Action*, included in the LWVIL President's Handbook
- *Local Program Handbook*, available from LWVIL
- *The Steps to Reaching Member Agreement Successfully: A Guide to League Consensus and Concurrence*, available from LWV of Texas (lwvtx@swbell.net)