

Fair Districting was the topic of the Sanibel League of Women Voters meeting on Monday, February 8, 1 pm at the Sanibel Library. Caroline Emmons-Schramm of the League of Women Voters of Florida (President from 2003-2005) presented the case for the two Fair Districting amendments that will appear on the Florida ballot in November. The purpose of the Fair Districting initiative is to provide clear, non-political standards that will require districts to be fairly drawn, compact and community based while preserving equal opportunities for minority voters.

Emmons-Schramm explained districting in Florida. Every ten years, after the census, the boundaries of our Congressional, state house and state senate districts are redrawn. This was originally intended to be sure that districts are roughly equal in population -- to make sure that every vote counts equally. However, politicians from whichever party was in charge at the time for re-districting have been drawing up districts that are "safe districts" for their party. In effect, "politicians are choosing their voters rather than voters choosing the politicians," remarked Emmons-Schramm.

Legislators use sophisticated computers, voter registration data and other demographic data to "pack and stack" districts to favor the political party in power. Currently, the only regulations the re-districting legislators are required to follow are: 1) the district must be contiguous and 2) every district must have roughly the same number of people. This has resulted in a number of districts that either stretch across the state, from Palm Beach to Lee County, for instance, or look like a crazy quilt stretching across several counties. This is difficult for constituents and is difficult for the legislator. The constituents often don't know their legislator and the legislator may have multiple counties and municipalities to represent which stretches them in terms of being able to provide services needed.

Emmons-Schramm announced that the standards amendments will be on the ballot in November, 2010 as Amendments 5 and 6. For the amendments to pass requires a 60% majority of Florida voters to vote for the Fair Districts standards amendments. To end this practice, The Florida League of Mayors, the Florida League of Cities and the Florida Black Caucus of Local Black Elected Officials have all endorsed the FairDistricts Amendments.

The Sanibel League of Women Voters can be reached at www.sanibellwv.org,

Submitted by Dr. Carolyn Gray