

## **League of Women Voters of Tompkins County Candidate Forums**

Candidate meetings have been around almost as long as the League of Women Voters. Their directive and reasoning have not changed through the years.

The Forum gives candidates an opportunity to present their views to audiences of varied political affiliation. It gives community members a means to form a first-hand judgment of the candidates.

League forums are fair; they are unbiased; they are competently run. League forums are conducted for informational purposes, without a hidden agenda, and are controlled by principles of nonpartisanship.

Forums provided by the League of Women Voters of Tompkins County focus on candidates running for state and local office.

### **Policy**

The League of Women Voters of Tompkins County will consider holding a forum for primary candidates if it is a contested race. The League must invite all candidates of the same party running in the contested race. At least two candidates must agree to be a participant in the primary forum. The League is not obligated to hold a candidate's forum for a primary election.

For general election races, the League will decide whether or not they will hold a candidates forum. "Write in" candidates are not included in the forum.

All candidates running in a general election must be notified of the date, place and time of the forum in a written invitation to participate. In that letter there must be a statement emphasizing that the League does not endorse or oppose any candidate or party, that the forum will be presented in a nonpartisan fashion. The League must maintain a fair, impartial, and clear candidate forum. A copy of the Candidate Forum Guidelines is included with the invitation to participate.

If there is a large number of candidates running for several offices, the League can decide to hold more than one candidates forums, having some offices on one day/night and the other offices another day/night. That way, there will be sufficient time for all candidates to have an opportunity to inform the community about their experience and positions on various issues. As well, it is an opportunity for the community members to gather information in order to make an informed decision about candidates that they choose to vote for in the general election. Another option is to hold a “meet and greet” event on one day/night. This is an informal gathering of candidates and community members to discuss issues and question candidates about their position on issues, one on one. This decision is made by the League.

If there is only one uncontested candidate for each office, a forum will not be held. The League is mindful of the possibility that if it allowed a forum of this type, the community could interpret a forum of this nature as “biased or bipartisan”. The League must maintain a nonpartisan position in all things. Instead, a “meet and greet” event for the candidates may be organized. This decision is made by the League.

If all candidates agreed to participate in the forum, assuming more than one candidate is running for the offices, and one of the candidates cancels their participation in the forum before it takes place, the forum for candidates running for all the other offices will be held. If the candidate has informed the League at least 2 weeks before the date of the forum, the League may attempt to reschedule the forum. The office which the declining candidate is running will not be included in the forum unless there are two or more candidates still agreeing to participate. If time permits, the candidate who does not have a running mate due to cancellation, can meet and greet community members after the formal forum.

The League of Women Voters of Tompkins County does not allow forums to be held when there is “an empty chair”. The candidates must be present to participate in the forum. Surrogates of a candidate are not allowed to participate in the forum.

If one candidate is late for the forum, the forum will be “on hold” for no more 15 minutes. If after that time, the candidate has still not arrived, the office for which s(he) is running will not be included in the forum, unless there are more than one of the candidates for that office still present. In that situation, the forum will be held for all the other candidates who are present.

There is a moderator who presides at the forum; her/his role is to ensure that all the policies are upheld. S(he) should also make it clear that the information provided by the candidates does not represent the views of the sponsoring organization.

Upon entering the room in which the forum is held, all persons must turn off their cell phones to prevent interruptions in the forum.

Members of the audience cannot audio- or video tape the forum without two weeks prior approval by the candidates and the League. Anyone who is granted approval to tape the forum should plan to tape the forum in its entirety. Except for media reporting the event, anyone who tapes the forum understands that the tape must be played in its entirety. There is concern that candidate statements may be represented out of context, that they may be manipulated to create false or misleading impressions.

#### FORMAT

An introduction to the forum will be made by one of the officers of the League. A moderator will preside over the forum. S(he) is chosen by the League because of her/his commitment to a fair, unbiased forum, and a nonpartisan procedure. The forum will begin with a review of the format that is to be followed. This is the role of the moderator.

There are at least two League members who will help with handing out 3x5 cards on which the community members write their questions. These two League members will then collect the written questions and give them to the moderator. The moderator will present the questions to candidates. The questions can be written for one or several candidates. If the question is for one candidate, the moderator may give the other candidates an opportunity to address the question. This may occur when there are a few number of candidates.

There is a timer for the forum. The timer will hold up signs letting the candidates know how much time is left for their statement. The signs will show 1 minute, 30 seconds. The timer will stand up holding the sign for STOP when the time has run out. This procedure is followed for all the candidates.

The times for the various parts of the forum are as follows:

15 to 20 minutes/candidate for opening statements

1 minute/candidate for answers to questions from the audience. These questions are written on 3x5 index cards and are presented to the candidates by the moderator

30 seconds/candidate for rebuttals, if desired

1 minutes/candidate for closing statement

Forum is completed within 1-1/2 hours

“Meet and Greet” evenings are arranged by the League to provide both candidates and community members an opportunity to informally have an exchange of information. These events are completed within 1-1/2 hours.

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