

Annual Report of the Budget & Structure Interest Group of the League of Women Voters of Cook County 2023-24

Note: Last year the name of this group was changed to the Cook County & MWRD Governments Group. Recently the name was changed back to the original name of "Budget & Structure." The focus of the group has not changed: we still focus on Cook County government and the government of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.

This report covers only some of the highlights of the work the Group did regarding Cook County government in carrying out the Program for this Group approved at last year's Annual Meeting. There is a separate report on what we did at the MWRD.

Impact felt this year from past accomplishment

Increasing democracy by giving voters a say on who would represent them when vacancies occur:

In last year's Report, we noted that as a result of an initiative of this Group, Commissioner Scott Britton sponsored a change to the County ordinances in 2022 regarding how vacancies in the offices of County Commissioner, Assessor, Clerk, Sheriff, and Treasurer would be filled. Previously, political party ward and committee persons would select a replacement for the remainder of the term for a County Commissioner, while the Cook County Board would select a replacement for the other officers. Under the change, if the remaining term of the office is more than 28 months, it is up to the voters to select who will serve the remainder of the term at the next general election, after the political party ward and committee persons select an interim replacement.

As a result, in March 2024, voters selected the Democratic Party nominee for the 1st District Commissioner in the primary, and that position will be on the ballot on November 5 for the remaining 2 years of the term. While the political parties will each determine who their nominee will be on the November 5 ballot to serve the remaining term of the County Clerk, the voters will decide among those nominees who will serve for the remaining 2 years of that term.

The Group's Program for 2023-24 approved at May 2023 Annual Meeting and What the Group Has Done to Carry It Out:

Continue to learn about, monitor, examine, and take action when appropriate regarding Cook County and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District governments, focusing on

A. Transparency and effectiveness of Board operations

- Met with several of the Commissioners to discuss what they hoped to accomplish during the remainder of their terms which end in November 2026. Brought up the difficulty in following Board meetings, as well as the need for all reports and presentations at meetings to be posted as required under the Board's rules. Also working with the Secretary to the Board to make sure postings are done. This requires continuous monitoring and action on our part.
- Will continue to meet with remaining Commissioners.
- Began observing the quarterly public meetings of the 3 Commissioners of the Board of Review. These meetings do not deal with appeals of property assessments, but with the operations of the Board. There is much to do to improve transparency from what we have observed thus far. Our next step is to meet with the current chair of the Board. Each Board of Review Commissioner takes a turn serving as chair for one year.

- Have contacted the Cook County President and Commissioners to urge that the Board reinstitute the practice of having separate meetings to deal with resolutions honoring people and events. This practice was previously in effect prior to Covid at the urging of the League. In recent months, the Board has taken up these resolutions at the beginning of the regular Board meeting, even prior to the public comment period. The Board has spent over 2 hours dealing with these resolutions. One effect has been to squash public comments. Speakers often cannot stay that long to present their comments at the delayed public comment period.

B. Boards' oversight of spending and programs, including use of appropriate performance objectives and measures

- Observed the Finance Committee's meetings with departments in July 2023 regarding where they were at with their 2023 budget and accomplishments, as well as what they were projecting for the 2024 budget year. Those Observer Reports were published on the LWVCC web site.
- Attended a briefing by the County's Bureau of Finance for good government groups on the proposed 2024 budget, as well as also observed all the meetings of the Finance Committee with departments on that proposed budget. Observer Reports for these meetings and for the meetings to amend and finalize the 2024 Budget were posted on the LWVCC web site.
- Have continued to follow the County's spending of the \$1 Billion the County received from the Federal American Rescue Plan Act. All proposed spending of \$1 Million or more must be approved by the County Board, but the President's departments have also advised the Board on smaller spending amounts. We have continued to stress the importance of identifying appropriate performance objectives, measures, and collection of data. A review by the Board is expected to take place as part of the Preliminary Budget review in July, and we have been invited by the Finance Committee Chair to provide our recommendations as to how this should be handled.

C. Inspector General reports and follow-up, and ethics

- Have expressed privately in meetings with County Commissioners and in letters to the President, as well as in both written and verbal public comments at Board and Committee meetings, our concern that the position of the County's Independent Inspector General (IIG) has not been filled on a permanent basis since the last IIG retired in October of 2022. The IIG also serves in that role for the Forest Preserve District and the MWRD per intergovernmental agreements. It appears that the selection process may be finally coming to a conclusion. We will continue to monitor and look forward to meeting with the new IIG.
- In the meantime, we continue to review the quarterly reports of the acting IIG. There have been a number of investigations resulting in the dismissal of employees who have received payments from the Federal government claiming the employees had small businesses impacted by Covid, as well as employees who have used County time and resources while either working for others or pursuing personal objectives. Have seen that more of the IIG's recommendations are being accepted and implemented by departments.

Members of the Budget & Structure Group: Carolyn Cosentino, Diane Edmundson, Kathi Graffam, Betty Hayford, Karin Hribar, Amy Little, Priscilla Mims, and Cynthia Schilsky