

The Voter



LEAGUE OF
WOMEN VOTERS®

Virginia Peninsula MAL Unit of the League of Women Voters of VA.

Christmas Party

Marty Tennille has offered use of her house for our Christmas party, She has decorated her house this year with over 4000 penguins inside and 250 penguins outside. So come to our penguin Christmas party and eat and sit and talk with friends.



When Dec 16th at 6:30 pm

Dinner Spiral Ham, veggies , shrimp and dessert . Marty was nice enough to donate the food as most people are coming from work. If you want to bring something email me.

Where 309 Burgh Westra Drive Hampton

Door Prizes— Two door prizes were donated by Marty

Please RSVP either way so we will know how much food to get!

From the President Our newsletter is a little different this month since we did not have a meeting. There are two items going on at the state level which will effect us. These two stories explain what they are and why they are important. See you on the 16th.

By [Christina Nuckols](#)

The Virginian-Pilot

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Two weeks ago, I headed over to Richmond's historic Byrd Theatre to see the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger film.

The villain was a lot scarier than the usual cyborgs and jungle-dwelling alien predators in past action flicks. This time the bad guy was gerrymandering.

For those of you who have no idea what I'm talking about, gerrymandering is what happens when politicians draw their own congressional and state legislative districts to give themselves safe seats and to terminate their enemies.

For those who think you already know what I'm talking about, the documentary "Gerrymandering" still carries plenty of surprises. First off, it's supposed to be pronounced with a hard G. Gary, not Jerry. The word was inspired by former Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry, who drew his political opponents into a salamander-shaped district in 1812.

But Massachusetts was a come-lately to this game. Patrick Henry carved fellow Virginia patriot James Madison into a hostile congressional district back in 1788 in a failed attempt to block his election. (Later, when Madison was president, his vice president was good old Elbridge Gerry.)

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Gerrymandering may not sound like a very creepy bad guy. It doesn't decapitate its victims or skin them alive, but it does reduce the value of your vote to that of a Confederate dollar bill. Sophisticated computer programs allow politicians to piece together friendly districts precinct by precinct, or even block by block, using demographic data and voting results from past elections. They control the outcome of elections before the voters ever arrive at the polls.

That didn't sit well with Schwarzenegger, the Republican governor of California who was having trouble getting cooperation from his Democratically controlled legislature. So he helped Common Cause and the League of Women Voters pass an initiative in 2008 that gave a 14-member bipartisan commission authority to draw state legislative districts.

The documentary chronicles the campaign to pass that reform. Moviegoers knew the outcome, of course. It passed by a narrow 50.9 percent. But there was still a sense of suspense in the theater. That's because the commission's existence was under attack in this fall's elections.

Good government groups were back on the California ballot last Tuesday with a proposal to give the commission charge over congressional districts. But opponents launched a counterattack, proposing a ballot question that would abolish the commission. Backers of the latter initiative included U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and billionaire Democratic donors George Soros and Haim Saban.

Reform advocates viewed the second ballot question as an attempt to confuse voters into supporting the wrong initiative or rejecting both. It didn't work. Sixty percent of Californians said they wanted to keep the commission and give it more power.

But while Californians are celebrating this happy Hollywood ending, Virginians are still trapped in the clutches of the gerrymander ghoul.

Olga Hernandez, president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia, once lived in California and recognizes that citizen ballot initiatives have wreaked havoc on the state budget, but it's hard not to be a little wistful over Californians' ability to take reform ideas straight to the voters. In Virginia, she and other advocates must ask state legislators to give up their redistricting power voluntarily. It's not been a successful strategy.

"You have to have a prominent person who can get the attention of the public," she said.

Like a movie star or a governor, for instance. Gov. Bob McDonnell promised as a candidate to create an independent redistricting commission but so far that hasn't happened. He did not support bills in the General Assembly this year to set up a commission, even bills sponsored by fellow Republicans. He has one more chance to keep his promise next year before the new legislative districts are drawn in the spring. Hernandez and other advocates met with him in August, but they're still waiting for a response.

"It stands at a standstill right now," she said.

This could be McDonnell's chance to star in his own movie: the sequel to "Gerrymandering." All he has to do is look those gerrymandering legislators in the eye and say, "Hasta la vista, baby."

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Several months ago Governor McDonnell's Government & Restructuring Commission was in Hampton Roads to hear ideas on saving money for the state. This week the Governor released a report for "Boards and Commission Elimination and Consolidation Recommendations Submitted for Consideration". The Governor states "We must make government simpler and easier to use, more efficient and more effective." One of the ways to do this, he says, is to reduce the number of boards and commissions in the state which has 360 boards, commissions, and authorities. There are approximately 4250 total citizens appointed to boards. With each board meeting an average of 4 times a year that equates to 1,440 board meetings per year in the Commonwealth. He also includes a flow chart for the removal process. Some boards are merged with similar boards to remove redundancy.

This seems like a good idea for the Commonwealth but consider this. Their process includes questions like "Does the Board reflect the priorities of the Commonwealth" and "Is state involvement critical" which are subjective questions. An example of one of the boards to be eliminated all together is the FOIA Advisory Council. This was a council designed in part as an alternative to litigation. The following is a description from the state for the council

The Virginia Freedom of Information Advisory Council, a state agency, is an office with the expertise to help resolve disputes over Freedom of Information issues. The FOIA Council answers questions from private citizens, state and local public officials, and the media about access to public records and meetings. Under Virginia law, the presumption is that all documents in the possession of public officials and all meetings of state and local public bodies are open to citizens of the Commonwealth. Of course, there are exceptions and these exceptions can lead to good faith disagreements between citizens or media and public officials.

By issuing advisory opinions, whether oral or written, the FOIA Council hopes to resolve disputes by clarifying what the law requires and to guide future practices. The FOIA Council has no authority to mediate disagreements, but may be called upon as a resource to offer solutions to resolve FOIA disputes. As part of its statutory duties set forth at [§ 30-179](#) of the Code of Virginia, the Freedom of Information Advisory Council is charged with providing opinions about the application and interpretation of Virginia's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), conducting FOIA training seminars, and publishing educational materials.

The Governor's reason for eliminating the board is that state statute already provides for attorney fees and that the Attorney General could issue opinions if needed. Well this is a reversal considering the board was made to help stop people from having to go to court. This is a sad option as most private citizens and watch organizations can not afford to go to court even if they will be eventually reimbursed at a later date. Thus, when they are refused a FIOA request they are more likely to just let it drop. Another concern was pointed out by the Virginia Coalition for Open Government. They say that the only certain designated government officials can request an opinion from the AG, whereas anyone (citizens, media, and government employees) can seek assistance from the FOIA Council.

There is an interesting turn since the Governor is a supporter of transparency in Government and has stated repeatedly in public that the state should be run in the sunshine. It is too bad with the elimination of this board it seems the only people hurt are citizens, media and government employees. Below are links to the articles on this issue. You can go to the Governor's website for the Government & Restructuring Commission and leave a comment about the removal of the FIOA board.

Governor's Elimination Recommendations document : <http://bit.ly/f9xJgc>

Government Reform & Restructuring website : <http://bit.ly/gxqtQK>

Virginia Coalition for Open Government article : <http://bit.ly/hUPmt2>

Virginia FIOA Council website : <http://bit.ly/fQhqzI>