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League of Women Voters of Bellingham/Whatcom County reminds us that each vote matters

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By KAY INGRAM — COURTESY TO THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

In less than a month, voters across Washington will receive ballots for the Nov. 6 election. It's no surprise that it contains a hotly contested race for president. What may surprise is the number of candidates on the ballot.

Statewide, there are contests for U.S. Senate, governor, nine positions from lieutenant governor to insurance commissioner and four judgeships. In Whatcom County, there are candidates for five legislative seats, Whatcom County Superior Court, and - if you live in the northern portion of the county - Public Utilities District commissioner.

Added to these are statewide ballot measures for controversial issues: taxes, public charter schools, same-sex marriage and legalizing marijuana. In Whatcom County there's also a proposition to expand the port commission from three to five members and, in Bellingham, a vote on funding low-income housing.

That crowded ballot can be daunting and sifting through claims and counter-claims bewildering.

For Washingtonians, it's never been easier to become informed about candidates and issues, and - with the mail-in ballot - to vote. But first, they must be registered.

That's why The League of Women Voters of Bellingham/Whatcom County is joining with thousands of League members nationwide in marking Sept. 25, as Voter Registration Day.

In 1920, just days after the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote, the league was founded by women who had struggled for decades - and even gone to jail - for that cause. They didn't take their hard-won right for granted, nor do today's members.

Although individual members have party preferences, the league is non-partisan so it can promote the widest citizen participation in elections. Voter Registration Day is a way of reminding citizens that registration is the first step to active, informed participation in decisions that impact their lives.

In Washington, registration is more convenient than ever. But remember, Oct. 29 is the deadline to register for the November election.

Until Oct. 8, registrations can be mailed in or completed online at the Secretary of State's website, myvote.wa.gov. Mail-in forms can be printed from the same site and are available at many locations around the county including public libraries and senior centers.

From Oct. 9 to 29, voters must register in person at the Whatcom County Auditor's Office.

Once registered, voters have an ever-widening range of information sources including printed Voter Guides from the County Auditor and Secretary of State mailed about the same time as ballots. The state guide is also available online at myvote.wa.gov.

Four years ago, the City of Bellingham joined the Bellingham/Whatcom League as co-host of its election forums, greatly expanding community outreach through its public access television channel. BTV10 shows the forums live, reruns them several times and makes them available on demand on the city's website cob.gov. Radio

stations KMRE-LP and KAVZ-LP will also repeat the audio.

This year, we welcome The Bellingham Herald as a valued partner in this voter education effort.

Four forums will cover state and local ballot issues and candidates for Congress, the Legislature, Whatcom Superior Court and PUD commissioner. A forum schedule is regularly printed in The Bellingham Herald and available online at lwwbellinghamwhatcom.org and bellinghamherald.com.

Each of these sites has links to interactive programs that allow voters to make side-by-side comparisons of candidates' answers to the same questions: the League's is vote411.org and The Herald's Election 2012 is on its website.

The last step is voting - and getting the ballot in the mail by Nov. 6.

Some people ask, does my vote matter?

There are many examples of one vote deciding an election or piece of legislation. League history illustrates how much one vote can mean.

In August 1920, women's suffrage had been approved by 35 state legislatures; 10 had voted against it. The deciding vote was Tennessee's. It certainly would fail. Then a young legislator changed his mind and voted yes.

Women had waited 133 years after the constitution was signed and 52 since African-American men received the vote to gain that same franchise. That one yes vote opened a new chapter in American democracy

Register. Inform yourself. Vote. One vote does matter.

Kay Ingram is co-president of the League of Women Voters of Bellingham/Whatcom County.

ELECTION SEASON

Starting Sept. 24 the Opinion page will feature columns in support and opposition to local and some state measures and from general election candidates who didn't face opponents in the primary election.

The Bellingham Herald has invited candidates to answer questions by Oct. 5 that will be posted online at BellinghamHerald.com. If you plan to write a Letter to the Editor about the election, we must have it by Oct. 26. Please use the online form at BellinghamHerald.com/submit-letter.

Our editorial board will be attending forums sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Bellingham/Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham to inform our endorsements. We hope you will also attend. The events are:

State ballot issues on gay marriage, tax changes, marijuana and charter schools will be the topic of the forum 10 a.m. to noon, Saturday, Sept. 29, at the Bellingham City Council chambers, 210 Lottie St.;

State legislative candidates will speak 6:30 to 9 p.m., Thursday, Oct. 4, at the Bellingham Municipal Court, 2014 C St.;

Congressional and Public Utility District 1 candidates will speak 7 to 9 p.m., Thursday, Oct. 11, at the Bellingham Municipal Court;

Whatcom County ballot issue representatives and Whatcom County Superior Court candidates will speak 10 a.m. to noon, Saturday, Oct. 13, at the Bellingham City Council chambers.

The league will be taking written audience questions for the candidates during the events.

The forums will be televised live and repeated on Bellingham's BTV Channel 10. The telecasts will also be available on demand on the city's website.