

To: Chairman John Barker and Members of the House Committee on Federal and State Affairs

From: Marge Ahrens and Carole Neal, Co-Presidents, League of Women Voters of Kansas

Re: Senate Bill 70 Amending the Kansas Open Meetings Act

Date: March 28, 2017

The League of Women Voters grew out of the fight for the vote. It has worked to engage the public in participating in government through observing public bodies, gathering candidates in forums, educating about the choices and effects of public policy and helping citizens to vote. But the public cannot know and form an opinion about the workings of government without access. Senate Bill 70 speaks to the right to know what is happening in a public meeting conducted by our elected representatives.

This bill represents some of the best work done by a League volunteer, Dr. Alan Cowles. His careful research and analysis of the ten largest cities and counties in Kansas found that in 2015 95% of their governmental bodies closed meetings without giving the public any meaningful information about the topics that were to be discussed. The public could not then learn the subject or action of such meetings.

It is believed that confusing wording in the Kansas Open Meetings Act has encouraged these practices which result in the public being shut out of decision making by their representatives more than necessary and certainly more than is healthy for an informed electorate. Senate Bill 70 eliminates the confusing wording of the current Act to clearly open meetings or close them with firm reporting requirements for the reason to close to the public.

The League of Women Voters advocates for transparency in government. Motions to close meetings have become rituals that give the public no chance to know what business is being conducted in closed sessions. Senate Bill 70 corrects this problem with clarity in the language. We ask that Senate Bill 70 be passed as presented.