

Leelanau LWV Continues to Support Early Childhood Millage

(This article has been written pending a final BOC vote on millage funding, but it remains relevant, regardless of the result.)

Two years ago, a 42-member early childhood committee, comprised of residents involved with and invested in the well-being of young children, met over a 4-month period to examine how our county is supporting young children and their families. They concluded that while there were some good supports in place, there were also big gaps in services. This group recommended to the Board of Commissioners that these gaps be addressed by implementing services supported by an early childhood millage. Leelanau County residents voted in November 2019 to fund this millage. At that time the League of Women Voters Leelanau County supported the millage with the League's position on early intervention for children at risk "supporting policies and programs that promote the well-being, development and safety of all children."

The Benzie-Leelanau Health District Health Department received the contract to provide early childhood services and proceeded to plan and begin implementation just as COVID hit. In-person programming converted to virtual programming, community outreach, checking in with families to assist in connecting them to resources, and supporting families in a myriad of ways. Providers reported that the need for these supports increased throughout the pandemic as parents lost jobs and families dealt with mental health and behavioral issues. In-person contacts resumed this summer with home visits, in-person play groups and larger group events. Increasing numbers of parents and children are accessing these early childhood services through Parenting Communities, administered by the Health Dept.

Just as early childhood services are becoming more comprehensive and broadly available in our county Commissioners Bunek, Rushton, Lautner, and Robbins recommended reducing the millage funding to zero for the coming year, effectively putting the provider on notice to stop planning for the future. The same commissioners who opposed the millage have determined, as Chairman Bunek stated, that "...When the people make a wrong decision, we (the county board) are here to make sure it doesn't go on." In justifying this position, they used the same unfounded arguments that they used in 2019 to oppose the

millage. Our young children, approximately 1000 up to age six, have not disappeared. They are still here, with all the needs they had in 2019. Now, they are faced with losing the services they were beginning to receive. The League, with a long history of protecting the vote and free and fair elections, views this BOC recommendation as a means of overturning election results. While the results were close, they were clear. Our residents voted to fund the millage.

The LWVLC supported our young children and their families in 2019 by advocating for the early childhood millage. We and all those who voted for it expect to see the millage funds collected and used as they were intended – for our families.

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