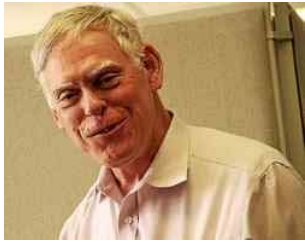


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New Paltz forum will detail paths to possible New York state Constitutional Convention

Friday, April 15, 2016



NEW PALTZ >> The League of Women Voters will host an informational forum Wednesday, April 20, on the state's Constitutional Convention.

The forum will begin at 7 p.m. at Deyo Hall, 6 Broadhead Ave., off state Route 32. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. Panelists will be SUNY New Paltz professor and state Constitution expert Gerald Benjamin, along with local historian and Ulster County Commissioner of Jurors Paul O'Neill and New York state League of Women Voters President Dare Thompson. There will be questions and discussion from the floor.

The first New York state Constitution was approved April 20, 1777. Since then, New Yorkers have voted every 20 years on whether to hold a Constitutional Convention to discuss amendments or reforms to the state's Constitution.

The question will be on the general election ballot in November 2017. Lobbying pro and con has already begun, according to a press release from the League.

"We can have a voice in the decision; we can pressure for a fair selection of delegates," Jean McGarry, the League of Women Voters of the Mid-Hudson Region's voter Services chairwoman, said in a press release. "This is promising to be a hot button issue, and, if we are honest, most of us don't really know enough yet to make an informed decision."

Benjamin said Tuesday that the state has two paths for amending its Constitution. One involves the state Legislature calling for a convention or proposing changes, which go to a public vote. The other path is the automatic ballot question that comes up every 20 years. The automatic ballot question allows voters to bypass the government to change the way it does business, if desired, Benjamin said.

The last time the question appeared on the ballot was in 1997, but the last convention was held in 1967, Benjamin said. He said if the public decides to hold a convention, delegates would be elected in 2018 and the convention would be held the following year.

The New York state League of Women Voters did not support the 1967 convention on grounds that the delegate choosing process was flawed, according to the group, which said it has not yet made a decision regarding the November 2017 referendum.

Thompson, who is expected to discuss effective methods for fair delegate selection during the forum, said League chapters usually initiate studies on issues of importance and the forum is part of the self-educating process for the Mid-Hudson League.

"I'm for it," Benjamin said of the convention, adding that he is also engaged in educating people statewide about the convention process.

Benjamin noted that Gov. Andrew Cuomo, in his recent budget message, proposed \$1 million to fund a commission to prepare for a Constitutional Convention, but the state Legislature removed that funding from the adopted budget.

Benjamin said the state Constitution offers several points of interest or importance to certain people and groups, including, for instance, the state Civil Service system and the pension system for state employees. Benjamin said some groups may not want the state to hold a Constitutional Convention for fear changes could affect issues they are interested in preserving. He said the New York State United Teachers union has already come out against the next convention over concerns about a pension guarantee for its members.

While there are particular interest groups opposed to a convention, a number of people are angry about the current state of New York's government, Benjamin said. He said that might be grounds for people to support a convention.

"New York state government has fallen into serious disrepute," Benjamin said. "Corruption is widespread. Experience shows that it will not be done by those in power now. This is the only opportunity New Yorkers will have in this generation to thoroughly reform their state government."

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