

Sunshine Law activist talks exposure to Manatee voters

By NICHOLAS AZZARA

nazzara@bradenton.com

MANATEE — One of the state's foremost defenders of the Sunshine Law was in town Tuesday to discuss what she called the "long, rich history of open government," and Florida's "famous" broad public access to government.

Adria Harper, director of the Tallahassee-based First Amendment Foundation, told the Manatee County League of Women Voters that the point of the Sunshine Law is to give residents a window into local government, but it does not apply to the Legislature or to courts. Special fact-finding boards are also exempt from the Sunshine.

"It's all about our right to participation and oversight of the government," Harper said.

"Nothing can be done to evade the public. Public participation is really critical."

She outlined the principles of a law that has held state agencies and local governments in check since 1967. The law requires reasonable notice for public meetings and prohibits officials from talking about public policy outside the public's view.

"If two or more members of a governing body are discussing public business, they're in the Sunshine, whether they're at city hall or at Arby's," Harper said. "How do you know they're not talking about those things if you see them in public? You have to trust that they're not, but savvy citizens will figure it out."

And though public participation is critical, it can be limited. That's why the Sunshine

Law allows local governments to put time constraints on public comments during meetings and hearings, she said.

Violators are subject to fines of up to \$500 and, if they purposely skirt the Sunshine, jail time up to 60 days. However, Harper said the bulk of Sunshine violations are unintentional.

If there's a question of a Sunshine violation, Harper encouraged people to contact local news media, the state attorney's office or her agency at (800) 337-3518.

Members of the League of Women Voters were disappointed no local representatives attended the discussion.

"Isn't it interesting that we have no elected officials here?" asked league President Valerie Fisher.

Crist inks Open Bill of Rights

TALLAHASSEE — State agencies must treat citizens with cour-

tesy, respect and professionalism when they ask for public records, according to an Open Bill of Rights signed Thursday by Gov. Charlie Crist.

It also requires officials to respond promptly, bars them from charging more than the law allows for copies and prohibits them from demanding that requests be put in writing unless specifically required by statute.

Crist also announced that agencies under his control will provide citizens with improved Internet access to key information including how to make public records requests, organizational charts, budget data and contracts with vendors and service providers.

"These initiatives are just one more way we are working to create a more open government for the people of Florida, our boss," Crist said. "By creating a culture that fosters public trust and confidence, we become a government truly in the sunshine."