

Walsh: The next lieutenant governor?

Friday, July 10, 2009

Last updated: Saturday July 11, 2009, 3:05 AM

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NorthJersey.com

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NEW JERSEY will soon have something truly new – a lieutenant governor. By the end of this month, each gubernatorial candidate must pick his running mate. While the job of lieutenant governor may seem unimportant, New Jersey has needed a successor or substitute for its governor often in recent years. Relying on the Senate president to fill in has proven problematic and confusing – hence the newly created position.

Among avid followers of Garden State politics, the guessing game is in full swing: Who will candidates Chris Christie and Jon Corzine choose?

Equally new to New Jersey politics in this election season is the makeup of the field of potential candidates – a roster that includes not just one or two token female names scattered among the men, but several women viewed as strong, serious possibilities, even frontrunners.

In each party, impressive and experienced women from North, Central and South Jersey are among those mentioned as real contenders, not simply window dressing.

Women such as state Sens. Diane Allen, Jennifer Beck, Barbara Buono, Dana Redd and Loretta Weinberg, along with Bergen County Clerk Kathleen Donovan, are seasoned political veterans, knowledgeable policy experts and proven vote-getters. And others are being mentioned as well – Monmouth County Sheriff Kim Guadagno and District Court Judge Anne Thompson, to name just two.

No longer can those vetting potential candidates or appointees lament that “I’d love to choose a woman, but I can’t find one who’s qualified!”

Not long ago, New Jersey ranked among the worst states in electing women. Had the gubernatorial candidates in 1997 needed running mates, they would have found only two women in the 40-member state Senate and 17 in the 80-member Assembly.

### **New Jersey in the bottom 10**

As recently as 2004, when Rutgers University’s Center for American Women and Politics tallied up the representation of women in each legislature, supposedly progressive New Jersey ranked 43rd out of 50, wallowing in the bottom 10 with the likes of South Carolina, Alabama and Oklahoma. Today, New Jersey ranks 11th in the nation, with women making up nearly a third of our Legislature — 10 in the Senate and 27 in the Assembly.

Change like this doesn’t just happen. Non-partisan and partisan groups as well as women leaders have been spotlighting the lack of women’s representation in government and politics.

An increasing number of women have been preparing to seek and hold office. They have been undertaking formal or informal training, developing networks and increasing their visibility, or doing the traditional party work, including fund raising, that gets possible candidates noticed and appreciated by party leaders. The political pipeline is filling with women candidates and officeholders at almost every level of government.

But other factors are at play. First, the departures from office of many men due to “legal problems” (including accusations of corruption, indictments and convictions) have created vacant seats, and county party leaders charged with filling the openings have increasingly turned to women, often viewed as less likely to be tainted or ethically challenged.

### **More positions are open**

Second, restrictions on dual-office holding, which have closed the door to holding multiple offices simultaneously, mean more slots are available to newcomers, who can build political careers on a foundation of local officeholding.

With a growing number of women developing relevant experience and paying the party dues necessary in New Jersey politics, many more women than ever before are indeed ready to run, or to serve when called upon.

None of this makes New Jersey a haven for political gender equity. Since Marge Roukema retired in 2002, no woman has served in New Jersey’s 15-member congressional delegation, either in the Senate or in one of the state’s 13 House seats.

And despite the growing number of women with impressive credentials, no woman's hat was tossed into the ring for this year's gubernatorial contest.

Former Gov. Christine Todd Whitman remains the sole woman ever elected statewide in New Jersey.

But the fact that women are being judged on the basis of their political assets, not merely their gender, signifies definite progress for New Jersey. Pols are gauging whether Donovan or Weinberg might help their candidates carry Bergen County, a must win for both Corzine and Christie, not whether either is suitably decorative.

### **An active role**

And if one of the women mentioned is actually selected, no one will expect her to stand by silently and watch government happen; anyone who knows the women under discussion recognizes that as an unlikely scenario.

Moreover, each has a track record of helping and supporting other women, so all signs point to even more women advancing in Garden State politics in the years ahead.


And because research at the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics shows that elected women make an important difference, that's a good thing, not just for women, but for government and all the citizens of New Jersey.

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