

Gloucester County Woman Publication - Educating the women of New Jersey - <http://www.gcwoman.com>
Women in Government Are on the Rise!

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Women in Government Are on the Rise!

Here's an eye opener: According to Debbie Walsh, the Director of the Center for American Women in Politics* (CAWP), women routinely underestimate their readiness to serve on the dozens of state Boards and Committees, while their male counterparts routinely assume readiness to jump in, both seeking and accepting appointments to serve with much higher frequency than women. Wow! This is 2008, and these gender differences are still in play, when it comes to women's participation in government!

Some really great news for women in New Jersey: In 2004, New Jersey was ranked 43rd out of the 50 states in the number of women in elected office. Then, thanks to the hard work and concerted efforts by programs such as CAWP's "Ready to Run," more women from all political persuasions have been recruited to run for office at all levels of government, and are given training and tools for understanding everything from how to put together a campaign, to handling fund raising and media relations. As a result, New Jersey now ranks 15th out of the 50 states, in the number of elected women officials. The CAWP aims to get New Jersey into the "top ten."

In addition to seeking elected office, women throughout the state can do a lot more to become involved and effective leaders right in our own communities.

An excellent free tool for understanding the basics is "The Citizen's Manual" by the Center for Civic Responsibility, from Metuchen, NJ. **



The three "centers of local power" in local government are your local elected council positions, the Planning Board, and the School Board. Because there are several different forms of local government, your municipality may have anywhere from 3 to 9 elected positions, so step one, if you're interested in seeking local elected office would be to find out what form of government your town has. A second point is to find out if the local elections are partisan or non-partisan, and whether you would rather run as an individual, or as part of a slate of candidates. Your Planning Board is responsible for making important local decisions involving land use and all aspects of implementing your town's "Master Plan." Many communities have now combined their Zoning Board and Planning Board into one Board, so if that is where your interests lean, you should find out how your municipality is structured, and whether you have combined or separate Zoning and Planning Boards.

Your School Board is responsible for every aspect of setting and managing your schools' budgets, which consume the largest part of every community's taxes. The basics are to find out how many members are on your Board, when are the next elections, how many positions may be up for election, and when the filing deadlines are. Typically, the School Board office has a package with the information you need to run for a position on the School Board.

In addition to the three "centers of power," most municipalities also have elected positions available on their Democratic and Republican Committees. A position on these Committees can often be a good way for local citizens to get involved in the kinds of issues directly affecting their local communities.

Another good way to get started is to find out the schedule of public meetings in your town, and begin going to meetings. This is the best way to get a feel for the kinds of issues and involvements of your local Boards. Don't be intimidated! What may seem strange and complicated at a first meeting will soon become second nature to you as you begin to get the picture of how these various Boards function.

A final note, the Governor's office makes numerous appointments to its Commissions, Boards, and Authorities. Go to the web site at <http://nj.gov/governor/boards> , and read about the many opportunities that exist for you to submit your resume for consideration to an appointment to any of the available vacancies.

Most importantly, know that our entire system of a free and vibrant democratic society depends on citizen involvement! Women's place in government in New Jersey is on the rise, and growing every day. There is help and advice out there for anyone interested in finding out how YOU can become a more active part of your community! Think about it!

* The non-partisan Center for American Women in Politics is a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. Visit their web site at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/index.html>

** The Center for Civic Responsibility, 450 Main St., Metuchen, NJ 08840;
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