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A woman's place is on the county board

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The Journal News*

CARMEL - When the Putnam County Legislature reconvenes this month, women will comprise one-third of the nine-member body for the first time in its history.

Though fewer in number, the percentage of women is larger than in the Westchester and Rockland legislatures.

"This year is a defining moment for women in government and public service in Putnam County," said Legislator Mary Ellen Odell, R-Carmel. "It's a new era for us as three very strong women with years of public service and experience in business are going to be voices for the people in Putnam County."

Odell is joined on the Putnam board by Legislator Mary Conklin, R-Patterson, and newly elected Legislator Dini LoBue, who replaces Robert McGuigan, R-Mahopac.

Despite the attention women candidates gained in this year's presidential election, the proportion of women officeholders at the national, state and local levels remains small, according to data from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

In 2008, only 16 of the 100 U.S. Senate seats were held by women while 72 women served in the 435-member House of Representatives. About 24 percent of the state legislators in the nation are women. In New York last year, there were 11 women in the 62-member state Senate and 39 women in the 150-member Assembly.

The reasons for the low ratio of women in elected office include tradition, fear, heavier caretaking responsibilities and weaker fundraising networks, women who hold elected office locally say. But the participation of women is essential, they say, in influencing the issues the boards consider and the way those issues are handled.

"Women really need to be asked to run because not that many will put themselves forward without stimulus," said Harriet Cornell, chairwoman of the 17-member Rockland County Legislature, which has two women.

"It's extremely important for women to bring their perspective to the formation of public policy because their experience is very different from their male counterparts," said Cornell, who has served for 24 years.

Legislator Lois Bronz, D-Greenburgh, one of three women on Westchester County's board of 17, said women seeking public office have trailed men because they "are not aggressive enough in fundraising and don't have the network of business contacts that men have."

But coalitions that support women candidates are gaining strength at a time women's input is indispensable, said Bronz, who has served as board chairwoman during her 16-year tenure.

"Disadvantaged children and families" will become increasingly vulnerable as state and local governments slash spending in response to the economic crisis, Bronz said.

"Women are absolutely more attentive to these issues," she said.

In Rockland, affordable, quality child care; domestic violence programs; pay equity for county employees and gynecological care for uninsured or underinsured women were not issues at the top of most men's agendas, Cornell said. As frontline caregivers, women also are more likely to pay attention to the aging of Rockland's population, she said.

"Women's input has made a difference in the way men think about these issues," said Cornell, chairwoman of the Eleanor Roosevelt Legacy Committee, a group that raises money, recruits and trains Democratic women candidates in New York.

Cornell has won the respect of her male colleagues, who have elected her to four (one-year) terms as Legislature chairwoman. She expects to be elected to a fifth.

"It took me three times as long to get elected," she said. "But my colleagues liked my leadership and so, conversely, I have served longer than anyone."

Jennifer Maher, president of the League of Women Voters of Eastern Putnam County, hopes the attention garnered by high-profile candidates like Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin will encourage more women to run for office in Putnam.

But assertive women can expect to face a backlash, said Maher, 38, a real estate agent who owns a business in Carmel.

"Assertive women are perceived as not so nice, especially if they are going into an all boys type of club," Maher said.

LoBue, who vanquished two male challengers in a Republican primary in Putnam and then funded her own campaign, said her gender may have helped her win a legislative seat.

During 11 months of door-to-door campaigning, LoBue said, she developed a personal rapport with voters that made them feel comfortable speaking to her about their interests and concerns.

"The trust factor plays a really big part," she said.

Additional Facts

If you go

What: The Putnam County Legislature's swearing-in ceremony

When: 6 p.m. Tuesday **Where:** The Historic County Courthouse, 40 Gleneida Ave., Carmel. **Who:** Newly elected legislators Dini LoBue, who won the District 8 seat covering Mahopac and parts of Carmel, and Richard Othmer Jr., who won in District 3 covering Kent. Sam Oliverio Jr., a Putnam Valley Democrat running with Conservative support, won a fifth term representing District 2. He remains the board's only Democrat.
