

The Leader

"Pulse of the Meadowlands"

SPECIAL REPORT: Women continue to lose ground in local politics

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By John Soltes / Editor in Chief

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But although the numbers are trending toward more female representation in elected office, women are still largely fighting for their political life in a man's world. The political progression of females in public office is a story where many candidates only make it so far, falling short of the ultimate prize. That story is also a tale of women themselves choosing to hold back from even offering themselves up as candidates. For though women don't have a balanced track record when it comes to winning elections, they also don't appear on the ballots nearly as much as their male counterparts.

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And in the South Bergen area, this is especially true.

Of all the mayors, commissioners and council members in *The Leader's* coverage area — 40 elected positions in total — men will fill nearly 93 percent of all seats in 2010. With the recent electoral loss of Maura Keyes in the Rutherford Borough Council race, there are only three female political officials left in South Bergen: Wood-Ridge Councilwoman Catherine Cassidy and Rutherford Councilwomen Rose Inguanti and Kimberly Birdsall.

All of the mayors, from North Arlington to Lyndhurst to Rutherford to East Rutherford to Carlstadt to Wood-Ridge, are men. In fact, except for Rutherford, all of these communities have never had a female in the mayoral position.

Historical first

Rutherford's Margaret Schak served as the first female mayor in the local area. In 1977, she was appointed following the resignation of Mayor William Brooks, according to documents provided by the Rutherford clerk's office.

She would only serve in the mayoral position for a few months, from July 6 to Nov. 9, but her tenure is one that will be remembered for its historical significance. Schak, today an active participant in the Rutherford Taxpayers Association and expert on the tax-sharing policies of the Meadowlands, was also Rutherford's first elected councilwoman, beginning her service in 1975. It was toward the end of that first council term that Schak decided not to seek re-election — for the very reason that some of today's potential candidates may hold back on running for office.

"I didn't run because we had raised six children," Schak said recently. "I was of an age where my husband was able to retire from his letter-carrying job. So I took a full-time job in private industry, and I worked temporary jobs from September to June, because I wanted to be home with the older children, who were in all types of sports."

Schak, elected as a Democrat, expected to finish her first council term and move on in private life. But the summer of 1977 saw her winning support from her fellow council members to take over the recently resigned mayoral position.

"They installed me in July as mayor and that was only because we had to have a Democratic mayor, because (the previous officeholder) was a Democratic mayor," Schak said. "There were three Democrats on the council. I offered it to the other two."

But Schak proved victorious — although it was only a vote among her council peers, it was an important vote that was decades in the making.

For a woman who was born on the second floor of a Lincoln Avenue house in Rutherford in the 1920s, one year after women won the right to vote, the accomplishment was groundbreaking.

Following almost immediately in Schak's footsteps was Barbara H. Chadwick, who would become Rutherford's second councilwoman and, as it turns out, its first formally elected female mayor.

Schak, today still respected for her local acumen, stuck to her commitment to leave office, choosing not to run as mayor of Rutherford after her few months in the top position. But rather than relinquish the position to an Alfred, Luther, Thomas or William (Rutherford's earliest mayors), Schak saw Chadwick, a Republican who would become a county freeholder, take over the position, an office she would serve in for 11 years until 1987.

It may have been a partisan loss in terms of Democrats losing to Republicans, but it was a transfer of a torch for the advancement of women in the local area, where Barbaras and Margarets are unusual additions to a council member's nameplate.

Bernadette McPherson would become Rutherford's third female mayor, serving from 2000 to 2007.

The story ends there?

So far, the history of female mayors in the South Bergen area begins and ends with these three women.

North Arlington, according to the memory estimates of the municipal clerk's office, has had three councilwomen (Connie Rosenblatt, Susan King and Maureen Tyler) — but no female mayors.

Lyndhurst, according to documents provided by the borough, has had two female commissioners (Evelyn Pezzolla and Roseann Primerano) — but no female mayors.

Carlstadt, according to the clerk's office, has had two councilwomen (Marie Myers and Lorraine Joewono) — but no female mayors.

Wood-Ridge, according to documents requested through the Open Public Records Act, appears to have had three councilwomen over the years (Claire Tomes, Dorothy R. Morisine and Catherine Cassidy, a current public official) — but no female mayors.

East Rutherford stands alone in the South Bergen area as the only municipality never to have a female council member or female mayor.

Entering 2010, no woman in the borough's storied history will have ever been elected to serve on the local governing body.

East Rutherford Mayor James Cassella remembers several female candidates for public office over the years, including one in the late 1950s, but never a woman who took in the most votes

on Election Day.

“I’ve had a woman run against me, and I’ve run with a woman when I was running for mayor,” Cassella said recently. “I don’t think there is anything to it, except for timing. In 2003, I ran with Jeffrey Lahullier, and a woman by the name of Janet Spaulding ran. And she was a strong candidate. Janet lost by 12 votes to George Perry (the other council candidate). He was a tough candidate to beat. He was a strong candidate and popular; if it was anybody but George.”

Cassella doesn’t believe the voters in East Rutherford have based their votes over the years on gender. “I would like to think that a candidate is a candidate,” he said. “I don’t think there are issues that are specific to the gender. There may be specific issues because someone is interested in recreation because of their children, male or female, and decide to run. The issues I don’t think would be gender-driven.”

The mayor pointed toward the number of women involved in the borough’s various departments and boards, from recreation to the library to the school board. “The first priority are the people you represent, male, female and children,” Cassella said.

A different perspective

Bergen County Freeholder Elizabeth Calabrese, a Democrat, will leave her post on the Wallington Borough Council at the end of this year. She has served at the municipal level since 2000 and the county level since 2004.

In an interview, she cited her busy schedule as the determining factor in her decision not to seek re-election. “Time constraints were just getting to me,” she said.

Calabrese said she is a firm believer in the concept that diverse governing bodies are advantageous for the communities they serve. “We’re made differently and we look at things differently,” she said, referencing the topic of women in politics. “They are half the population and they should be half (of public officials).”

One of the reasons more women aren’t elected and more women don’t offer themselves as candidates, Calabrese said, is because of the very reason she decided to end her tenure on the Wallington Borough Council and the reason Schak gave as her exit from Rutherford politics. “Women traditionally have had a lot on their plates,” she said. “Most women are still responsible for taking kids to school and making them dinner. But I see that changing in the coming generations.”

To break that cycle, Calabrese said more women need to step forward and take the chance at public office. Once that happens, a “stronger voice” will be established and females will “realize that they can bring value and perspective.”

Calabrese said the local area has always been largely conservative and that an elected position has always been seen as a role for a male.

It’s the realization that women can perpetuate unique change, Calabrese said, that will change the demographics of governing bodies. “You don’t go into politics for the money or the perks, but the rewards,” she said. “I have a great sense of accomplishment and pride in myself. I can stand up in front of a group of people and speak coherently.”

These were traits Calabrese said she found in herself when she offered her time to elected office. "I tell women, 'You can lead already. You're presidents of PTAs or vice presidents.' These are stepping stones to a little bit larger of a leadership position."

Calabrese and her family know the harsh reality of a society where women may not exactly feel encouraged to run for office. In 1956, Calabrese's family escaped the Hungarian revolution and came to New Jersey as political refugees. "It was a turning point in seeing the value of living in this society," she said. "I see all the opportunities that our way of life affords people. ... This town and country fostered me."

Currently, Calabrese serves on a freeholder board consisting of four males and three females. But, with the recent electoral loss of Freeholders Julie O'Brien and Vernon Walton and the electoral wins of Republicans John Driscoll Jr. and Robert Hermansen, that board will tilt more in favor of the men.

Calabrese said O'Brien brought a unique perspective and advocacy on issues ranging from the arts to open space. "It will be a great loss," she said. "Women just have a different perspective."

The women of 2010

Rutherford Councilwoman Kimberly Birdsall, a Democrat, said that when she decided to run for public office last year, it was all about her platform of ideas. "Gender never crossed my mind as a factor for running or winning the seat," she said. "Ultimately people just want dedicated individuals. Voters and residents deserve dedicated individuals."

But Birdsall admitted there are challenges for a woman in public office, mainly juggling the demands of work, family and school. "I think that when you're going to be a public servant, that's going to be a top priority," she said, adding that it takes a person with the right organizational skills to fit the part of a modern woman in public office. "I don't have a lot of time on my schedule. It's important to cut to the chase and try to make a decision. And council meetings going to 1 a.m. is not very effective time management. ... Nonsense gets me frustrated."

Much like Calabrese at the county level, Birdsall will lose a fellow Democrat at the local level with Keyes' recent unsuccessful bid for re-election. "Councilwoman Keyes has really tried to serve the community," Birdsall said. "It's important to look at public officials as doers and not just talkers. Councilwoman Keyes has tried very hard. She has tried to be a doer, and hopefully she'll continue in other capacities."

Though Birdsall was hesitant to look at herself as a role model for younger women, she did reference a recent example in her life that gave her much pride. "One of the proudest moments so far was when my son in a project indicated that I was his role model," she said. "But I just see myself as dedicated to the town I live in."

Birdsall's colleague on the council, Rose Inguanti, a Republican, shares many of her thoughts.

"I'm sure there are some who wouldn't vote for a woman, but I suspect that is a small number," Inguanti wrote in an e-mail.

In her opinion, more women aren't council members "because it takes a lot of time away from

your family.”

Instead, “women tend to focus more on serving in their kids’ schools. I often think we should let PTA moms (and dads) run the world. Things would be done quicker, cheaper, and there’d be brownies at every meeting.”

As far as the actual governing, Inguanti sees commonality not in terms of gender, but in terms of which members on the council are parents, taxpayers and homeowners. “Of course, we all have areas of interest or expertise,” she wrote, adding that women “talk more” and that her male counterparts would like her to “talk less.” Though Inguanti jokingly believes her female colleagues may share that belief as well.

In the end, Inguanti is reminded of why she entered politics: “I thought a lot of things were wrongheaded, like EnCap, Xanadu, the (Council on Affordable Housing) and double-digit tax increases.”

Councilwoman Catherine Cassidy, of Wood-Ridge, is a veteran of municipal government. She is serving in her 11th year as a council member. With that perspective, she doesn’t believe there is a gender bias at the polls and she said she doesn’t exactly know why there aren’t more councilwomen.

“I can’t say if I serve differently than a man, but I am sure sometimes women do bring different issues to the table,” she stated. “Often they are the ones caring for sick family members, running the households, and their focus may be on issues directly affecting families.”

Cassidy said she does try to be a role model, attempting to instill in impressionable minds the value of serving and being a good citizen. “I got involved because I have always thought public service and participating in government was important,” she stated. “I got involved because I love Wood-Ridge and wanted to try and make a difference.”

Dissecting the issue

The success of women in politics is admittedly a difficult concept for some to understand — especially depending on the person seeking answers. Those few in the local area fortunate enough to win approval from voters can bask in the glow of victory, but their service still only represents the most miniscule of percentages.

For every victory (Kim Guadagno will be the first lieutenant governor of New Jersey), there is a defeat (Loretta Weinberg will not be the first lieutenant governor of New Jersey).

In 2009, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, 90 women serve in the United States Congress (17 in the Senate and 73 in the House of Representatives). These officials represent 17 percent of our nation’s legislative arm, which is either an accomplishment, a distressing statistic or both. The numbers are even lower for governors in the U.S.; only six women currently serve in their respective state’s highest office.

When it comes to women of color in elective office, the numbers are considerably lower.

In the New Jersey Legislature this year, 10 out of 40 open slots in the state Senate and 27 out of 80 open slots in the state Assembly are filled by women. This leads to a percentage of 30.8 percent, according to the CAWP, which ranks New Jersey’s Legislature number 11 in the U.S. in

terms of the proportion of women.

From 1848 when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, N.Y., to 1920 when the 19th Amendment gave suffrage to women, to 2007 when Hawaii's Colleen Hanabusa became the first woman of color to serve as president of a state senate, the obstacles and benchmarks of women attaining higher office are being met. But the prospects for a governing field of 50-50 proportionality, like Calabrese recommended, seems to be, at the moment, lost on the horizon.

"It's a tough road, it really is," Calabrese said. "I think women still feel responsible for being the center and core of making sure everyone is taken care of. ... But I would tell any woman who is considering public office that the rewards are there for you personally and for your children. You're creating a better world for them. There are tradeoffs, but the gains outweigh them."

As women in the local area await more representation, the grass grows taller on the graves of the original suffragists.

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