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Iowans push for women lawmakers

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AMES, Iowa -- With women making up only 23 percent of the Iowa Legislature, a new bipartisan organization has begun a 10-year campaign to prepare and elect more women lawmakers.

The 14-member board of 50-50 in 2020: Political Equity for Iowa Women was scheduled to announce the initiative today in eight cities in Iowa, including Ames.

Launched by Maggie Tinsman, a Quad Cities Republican who was the first woman elected to the Scott County Board of Supervisors and is an 18-year veteran of the Iowa Senate, and Jean Lloyd-Jones, an Iowa City Democrat who served eight years each in the Iowa House and Senate, the initiative includes plans for a three-day intensive training event for women. The "Blueprint for Winning Academy" will be hosted by the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University and the Iowa NEW Leadership program in Iowa City in January 2012.

Dianne Bystrom, director of the Catt Center, said the center is "thrilled to be a partner with the 50-50 in 2020 initiative."

"It fits with the Ready to Run Iowa: Campaign Training for Women program we've been doing in conjunction with Center for American Women and Politics of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University for several years," Bystrom said.

The Catt Center offers Ready to Run Iowa every other year, and the next program, scheduled for June 2011, will dovetail with the 50-50 in 2020 initiative, Bystrom said.

"We're coordinating our efforts to meet shared goals to get more women to run for elected and appointed office," Bystrom said. "There can't be too many of us doing this work."

Even with a record high of 35 women in the Iowa Legislature, the state still ranks 27th in the nation in that regard, Bystrom said.

"And worse, Iowa and Mississippi are the only two states that have never sent a woman to Congress or elected a woman governor," she said.

The current political climate presents opportunities for women candidates, however, Bystrom said, at a time when voters are seeking "change."

"In general, voters perceive women candidates as being more honest and more competent on such issues as education and health care than their male counterparts and consider them equally as competent on economic issues as men," she said.

Nationally, 238 Democratic and Republican women are running for the U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives and governorships in 2010, according to figures from the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics. Twenty-nine women are running for lieutenant governor seats, including Iowa incumbent Democrat Patty Judge and Republican challenger Kim Reynolds, and 76 women are running for other statewide elected executive offices, including Republican Brenna Findley, who is running as a challenger for attorney general in Iowa.

Tinsman said last year Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin "upped the ante quite a bit" for women candidates and women voters, and Iowa has great stock from which to draw.

"We have a million women who are well educated," she said, "plus, 53 percent of the electorate is female, and they vote heavily."

Tinsman said the 50-50 in 2020 initiative isn't asking to give women the upper hand or make them the majority.

"We just want balance," she said. "2020 will mark a century since women's suffrage. A century is long enough for equity."

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