

Women's caucus seeks more female candidates

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by Rachel Miller

Last month's celebration of Women's History highlighted efforts by government leaders in Bloomington and local groups in Monroe County to breathe new life into a movement that is losing momentum.

The proportion of women candidates in city elections has dropped to the lowest rate in two decades, according to the Bloomington Commission on the Status of Women, which began researching the issue after the first all-male City Council in 30 years was sworn in last year.

"I wanted to be able to take action and change the situation for and on behalf of women," said Commission Chair Jullian Kinzie, who said that despite Bloomington's progressive character, disparities exist with women being underemployed. This "trailing spouses" situation is only one indicator of gender inequity that will be used to measure future progress.

Over the past year, the commission discovered barriers in the community by monitoring a range of areas. A report, to be released this month, shows a lack of female positions on local boards and commissions. While many formal titles held are in health and education, most are administrative and not elective.

Any office held by a woman is an important stepping-stone, said City Clerk Regina Moore, who stresses the need for positions dealing with larger budgets. For instance, the City Council decides spending for social programs, creating a situation where locally active women ask for money instead of being directly involved in allocating the resources.

This under-representation has muted female voices to speak as policy makers. Moore saw the importance of this perspective at recent meetings on city planning. "Are women just regulated to the suburbs?" she asked.

Moore stresses the concern is not an opposition to male colleagues, who have been sensitive to the issue in unprecedented ways. But, the service of these men has a missing element with women not writing or voting on the city's laws.

As a newcomer, Moore's 2003 campaign planted a seed that grew into a new way of engaging political involvement. She founded and became chair of the Monroe County Democratic Women's Caucus. The Caucus' goal is to support good leadership by not just promoting women, but committed, energetic, smart people.

In last year's county election, the group gave \$3,000 in raised contributions to increase visibility and awareness of female candidates. "Early money is like yeast, it helps the dough rise," Moore said.

The Caucus has gained seriousness as a Political Action Committee and uses its power to recruit and train future female politicians. The network provides a connection to party officials, while the group gives feedback through participation in the campaign process.

Additional encouragement comes from member experience. Many women face the struggle to devote themselves to a political climate that is often not family friendly.

Julie Thomas, a member and organizer of the group's book club, says the most important lesson is realizing "change doesn't happen over night and it doesn't happen easily."

Any politician should expect opposition, but the caucus can be a backbone of support against public attacks, Moore said. By not being alone, women candidates will be less afraid and more creative.

Moore emphasized that women in Bloomington are already active and interested in social issues. The concern isn't ability, but mindset. Learning to articulate opinions is a small part to a larger liberating experience of relieving self-doubt.

"The only obstacle is yourself and understanding what you can do," Moore said.

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