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Women making strides at town hall; Woodcliff Lake's council among few with female majority

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When Angela Hayes and Kristy Herrington joined the Borough Council in Woodcliff Lake earlier this month, they nudged the borough into the small cadre of New Jersey towns with a majority-female governing body.

Along with Jacqueline Gadaleta, who was reelected in November, and an incumbent, Jeanine Chiavelli, they outnumber their male counterparts 4-2, making Woodcliff Lake the only municipality in either Bergen or Passaic county governed by a council dominated by women.

"I think it's great if the women majority on council can be inspiring to other women or young girls," said Chiavelli, who was elected to the council in 2014. "But I think what we all really have in common is we all are passionate and have common goals in serving our community."

Woodcliff Lake isn't alone, but it is in an exclusive club — even in 2016. Experts say that only a few New Jersey councils are evenly split between the sexes, and even fewer are dominated by women.

"There have been a majority of women on councils before, but it is not a common thing," said Gilda Morales, the information services manager at Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "You can count the instances. We still have counties in New Jersey that don't have woman mayors, let alone a majority on a council."

Statewide figures reflecting the results of November's election are not available, but an analysis by The Record of the most recent data from the New Jersey League of Municipalities found that only about 4 percent of towns in the state had a council with a female majority in 2014.

That disparity stretches across all levels of New Jersey politics.

Eleven of the 40 members of the state Senate are women, and women account for 25 of the 80 members of the Assembly. Together they account for 30 percent of the Legislature, higher than the national average of 24.4 percent as measured by the Center for American Women and Politics. Only one woman, Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, a Democrat, represents New Jersey in either house of Congress. (Coleman also is one of just 84 women among the 435 members of the House of Representatives. In the U.S. Senate, 20 of the 100 seats are occupied by women.)

The rate of participation by women is even lower at the local level, according to the center's director, Debbie Walsh. Only nine towns among the 72 New Jersey cities with a population of more than 30,000 have female mayors, Walsh said, and only 66 of the 493 towns with fewer than 30,000 people have women as mayors.

"At the municipal level there has been a struggle to see women rising up to those positions," she said.



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Councilwomen Kristy Harrington, Jacqueline Gadaleta and Angela Hayes are shown at a meeting Tuesday Jan. 19, 2016.



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Councilwoman Jeanine Chiavelli listens to a resident's concerns after the meeting Tuesday Jan. 19, 2016.

The dearth of women in local government stems in part from the structure of New Jersey politics, Walsh said. Because of the state's strong party system — and the fact that a small number of people in each municipality decide who appears on each party's ticket — it can be difficult for women, or any political newcomer, to run, Walsh said.

"I don't know if I'd necessarily say men don't pick women to run," Walsh said, noting that only four women lead county parties in the state. "But I think people pick people to run who look like them and they are familiar with."

In Woodcliff Lake, the councilwomen said they hope that more women will buck that trend and run for office in the future.

"We're moving in the right direction, and that is a good thing," said Gadaleta, a Democrat who joined the council after unseating an incumbent councilwoman, Jean Bae, in a narrow election that was settled with a recount. "We represent half of our constituency, which are women, and bring something of a different perspective to the council."

Chiavelli, a Republican, said she decided to run for council once she "got hooked" to attending meetings as a member of the public. She said that she and her female colleagues — Democratic and Republican alike — all have a singular goal of making positive changes in Woodcliff Lake.

"We are very fortunate to have a diverse group of people on our council — not only women but also engineers, accountants, police experience," she said. "You need to have a balance."

Walsh, of the Center for American Women and Politics, said the borough could benefit from new perspectives.

"We know from our research that women bring different life experiences and perspectives to public policy," she said. "All of these different experiences shape what matters to us; it's unavoidable, whether you are black, white, Latino or anything else."

Herrington, a Republican, said she believes the most recent election showed that voters in Woodcliff Lake — who also elected Carlos Rendo, the borough's first Latino mayor — simply chose candidates who they believe will best serve them, without focusing on gender, ethnicity or other factors.

"I think this just says that Woodcliff Lake votes for people who will speak out and serve them," she said. "Woodcliff Lake is very progressive in their thought process — they are voting for people to represent the community with passion, regardless of where they came from."

Donna Lent, the president of the Washington-based National Women's Political Caucus, a progressive organization that recruits, trains and helps to elect women, said she was excited to hear that women now have a majority on the Woodcliff Lake council.

Election to a municipal council or a school board can be a steppingstone for women to political roles at the county, state and national levels, she said.

"It has to happen; it's been long overdue," Lent said. "Having women in a pipeline begins at the lower levels of government, whether that is town councils, school board, advisory committees or anything. That gives you recognition when other, higher-up opportunities present themselves."

The Woodcliff Lake councilwomen said they hope more women will get involved in politics but for now, they are more focused on local issues — such as creating a walkway around the Woodcliff Lake reservoir and maintaining the level of services residents have come to expect.

"It's hard to believe in 2016 that we are sitting here saying that the Woodcliff Lake council is the only council in Bergen or Passaic counties to have a majority of women," said Hayes, a Republican. "I hear my aunts talk about men in the workplace in the 1970s and what that was like, and we've come a long way. But we're not done."

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