

Increasing Women's Engagement in Local Government

Tips for Recruiting Candidates to Local Government Office

By Dan Hill, UW-Extension Local Government Center Specialist

Local government decisions influence everyone. Women in elected office provide representation to women in the community that they otherwise would not have received. Additionally, research shows that more diverse groups make better decisions. Having more women on local boards could change the dynamics of how things operate for the better by having more balanced conversations and decisions, by challenging tradition and conventions, and by obtaining outcomes that are different than they otherwise would have been.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies have been developed from focus groups of women who have successfully run for and served in local elected office in Wisconsin. Focus group participants were asked for their experiences and perspectives on what effectively and successfully got them interested in running and serving in office.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 1: Identify the position and be clear on why you are recruiting for that particular position.**
 - Consider starting with a vacant position.
 - It may be easier to recruit women to boards/councils where there is already one woman serving.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 2: Build trust with the candidate.**
 - Make “the ask” comfortable, face to face, and informal.
 - Find someone to help you who has a previous relationship with the recruit.
 - Include different kinds of people in the recruitment process—local elected officials, friends, influential people, and/or family members. It may be beneficial to find other women to help you recruit women.
 - Conduct a one-on-one with the possible candidate without any kind of request. This is an opportunity to get to know someone better—what their interests are, what their concerns are, where their passions lie. This could take the form of asking them for what they would look for in a good candidate for the position you are targeting.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 3: Be persistent.**
 - The candidate may never have considered running for an office. The recruitment process may be similar to planting and nurturing a seed. You will likely need to give them time to internalize the idea of running and seeing themselves in the position.
 - Ask multiple times in multiple ways. Consider a step-by-step approach, including encouraging different people to make “the ask.”

- ✓ **STRATEGY 4: Make it clear that you believe in them.**
 - Candidates need to hear that they are viewed as leaders; that they are competent, that they have the necessary skills, that they will do a good job, and that they are respected in the community.
 - Convey that you are interested in them as a candidate because you believe in their strengths and what they would bring to elected office – it’s not just about filling a position.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 5: Emphasize that they can make a difference.**
 - Focus group participants indicated that they want to make a positive difference in their communities. They are less interested in having a particular position. For this reason, it’s important to know what their priorities are.
 - Many women in our focus groups referred to themselves as advocates. This can be a selling point in recruiting women; they can be an advocate for a cause, a group, and their community.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 6: Assure the candidate that she can learn on the job.**
 - Assure her that she is already qualified to begin the job.
 - Focus on the candidate’s strengths and not on what the candidate does not know – parliamentary procedure, zoning codes, cube and gutter dimensions, etc.
 - There is lots to learn, but that comes with time in the position and there are lots of resources to help support elected officials.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 7: Be prepared to commit to supporting the candidate.**
 - Help with figuring out the nuts and bolts of getting on the ballot, campaigning, building a support network, fundraising, etc.
 - Remember that support will be needed before, during, and after the campaign.

REFRAMING CONCERNS

Women likely have a very different understanding of the process of campaigning and holding office. Their different understanding often creates barriers to participation. The goal is to provide different perspectives on campaigning and holding office, i.e. to reframe the questions and barriers.

If potential candidate says...	You might say or do...
She lacks an interest or willingness to ask for campaign funds AND/OR she has concerns about a negative impact on her personal finances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let the candidate know that for this election she would not have to raise funds (most local elections require little, if any, campaign expenditure). ● For campaigns that require funding, you and others will help with/take care of fund raising. ● Be honest and realistic about the time commitment.
She is concerned about the amount of time it will take from family and home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make sure that the candidate has a realistic understanding of the time commitment—it may be less than she thinks. ● In the case of mothers, some women stated that this could be a win-win with the children getting a better appreciation of local government. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Chance to get the children involved. ○ Chance to set an example for the children.
She lacks a willingness to meet voters door-to-door	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tell candidates that many women who dreaded this later report that this was their favorite part of running for office (though there are “moments”).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer to find people to accompany her. • Do not go door-to-door when the Packers are playing.
She fears a negative political atmosphere.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell candidate that she has the interpersonal skills to change that atmosphere. • May not be what she thinks; often local situation looks nothing like the state and federal.
She has concerns about criticism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissent is a sign of respect
She perceives a lack of support for her candidacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test the waters, find out what others think of her as a possible candidate. • Reiterate her strengths that are important to the job—listening, communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, collaborative approach to tackling issues, respectful dialogue, wisdom, etc. • Challenge her right then and there to write down the names of two dozen people who would support her. You do the same. Now you have nearly 50 people you can call for support.
She does not think she would do a good job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize that no one starts in these positions knowing all there is to know. • Everyone engages is on-the-job training. • Reiterate her strengths • Talk about the cross-over skills (from business or non-profit to government) that the candidate has
She fears losing the election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research shows that women and men win elections at the same rate. • Losing is always a possibility. But, talk about her strengths. • Running for office is a good learning experience for the next time you run.
She does not want to run against the incumbent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many incumbents want to step down but keep running because no one else will run. • Emphasize the idea that this is not an athletic competition, it is about providing choices to the voters. • Emphasize the public service aspect of running and impact she can have. • Find a position that is vacant to run for.

OTHER AVENUES

Increase women’s engagement in local government by getting women appointed to local commissions and boards for which they do not need to campaign. Previous involvement in local government was cited by many of the women in our focus groups.