



Diane Mack

Can right woman win District 4 in 2018?

In this year in which we witnessed the defeat of a woman who was the most qualified of four candidates for a vacant Escambia County Commission seat (District 1) the community has been given an uncommon opportunity. In announcing several weeks ago that he will not run for re-election in 2018, Grover Robinson, County Commissioner for Escambia's District 4, opened the door for candidates who would not have challenged his strong incumbency and has given them a long lead time to prepare a campaign.

This is an opportunity that should be seized by an accomplished woman residing in District 4 with the necessary skill set to win. Whoever you are, we encourage you—strongly—to do so. The Institute for Women in Politics stands ready to provide you counsel, campaign training, and information about financial resources. We will try to secure you an experienced political mentor. We cannot endorse you nor contribute financially to your campaign, but we can offer encouragement, moral support, and the benefit of what other women have learned from their own political battles.

Could a woman win the District 4 Commission seat? We believe the answer is "yes," even though the 2016 elections produced mixed and sometimes discouraging results for women candidates.

There were 14 contested races in Escambia County. Of 10 women candidates on the ballots, only two were elected, both of them incumbents: Vicki Campbell (ECUA) and Jewel Cannada-Wynn (Pensacola City Council). In 2014 there were fewer contested races (8) and women candidates (7), but the same number elected, also incumbents: Linda Moultrie (School Board) and Sherri Myers (Pensacola City Council).

In Santa Rosa County the very low number of women candidates in 2016 could well have been a reaction to the outcome of the 2014 elections. Two years ago there were 13 contested races in Santa Rosa, 14 women candidates, and five women elected, two incumbents and three newcomers. The incumbents were Diane Scott (School Board) and Patsy Lunsford (Milton City Council). The newcomers were Carol Boston (School Board), Mary Ellen Johnson (Milton City Council), and Ashley Lay (Milton City Council).

In 2016 there were 9 contested races in Santa Rosa, but only three women candidates. Two women were elected, Mary Ellen Johnson (incumbent) and Peggi Smith (newcomer), both for Milton City Council seats.

This year there were 6 contested races for offices where voting crossed county lines. Four women competed in those races; only one woman was elected, newcomer Melissa Nelson, as Florida State Attorney for District 4, most of which lies in Okaloosa County. In 2014 five multi-county races were contested and drew just two women candidates. They competed for an open judgeship in the First Judicial Circuit, and it was won by Jennie Kinsey.

For all the election statistics which we have compiled from the 2016 and 2014 elections, including Okaloosa County races, go to: <http://iwppflorida.org/elections-2/election-2016-candidate-watch/>.

Back to the original question: Can a woman win election to an open seat on the Escambia County Commission in 2018?

In 2016 Pam Childers soundly defeated a male incumbent to become the first woman elected as Escambia County Clerk of the Court and Comptroller. The incumbent had held the post for 55 years.

In 1986 Muriel Wagner defeated a male incumbent for the District 4 County Commission seat, the first woman to serve in that position.

In 1924 Fannie Salmons defeated seven male candidates for the then District 1 seat and became thereby the first woman ever elected to the Escambia County Commission.

Yes, a woman can win in 2018. She will need superb credentials, a fierce determination to win, an extensive campaign organization, and substantial financial backing. She will need to work at winning harder than anyone else who enters the contest. And she needs to come out of the starting gate on January 2, 2017.

Diane Mack was founding president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and currently serves as treasurer. This Viewpoint is offered on behalf of the IWP Board of Directors. To inquire about membership in the Institute, email contact@iwppflorida.org.