

Meet Cape Coral's first woman mayor



Diane Mack

VIEWPOINT

When Marni Dilsaver Sawicki was elected mayor of Cape Coral in 2013, the first woman in the city's history to win the seat, a reporter asked her what the election symbolized. "A willingness to change," she said. "It is a huge accomplishment for people of the city to have been able to put outdated beliefs aside and say, 'I can support a woman.'"

Mayor Sawicki will be the keynote speaker at the third annual meeting of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida on June 15 at the Pensacola Yacht Club. In addition to institute members and invited guests, there will be limited seating available for members of the public at a cost of \$10 per person. Reservations are required, and anyone interested should email the Institute office at contact@iwppflorida.org.

Just 15 percent of Florida cities with populations greater than 30,000 (20 cities

out of 137) have a woman serving as mayor. In the country as a whole, the percentage is 18.8 (262 cities). San Antonio, with a population of 1.3 million, is the largest city with a woman mayor at the present time. She is Ivy Taylor, the city's first African-American woman mayor. Houston, which has a population of 2.2 million and a mayor-council government like Pensacola's, has had two women mayors, the most recent being Annise Parker, who served the maximum three terms. Pensacola has never elected a woman mayor, though at least three women have presented themselves as candidates.

Marni Sawicki had lived in Cape Coral only three years when she ran for mayor. News reports and opinion pieces from 2013 describe a governing body — the City Council and its mayor — as divisive, unprofessional in its deliberations, and deaf to the concerns of citizens. Two councilmen and the mayor ran in the primary election against 11 other candidates. The incumbent councilmen lost. The incumbent mayor lost to Ms. Sawicki by 123 votes.

In the 2½ years since she took office, she has restored decorum and professionalism to the conduct of council business

and public meetings. In the words of city manager John Szerlag, "has actually gone outside the boundaries of Cape Coral and has made it known ... what a good city Cape Coral is to come to When I first came to Cape Coral, people thought it was Coral Gables. Now, everyone has heard of Cape Coral."

Ms. Sawicki has also succeeded in getting the city to move forward with planning for Bimini Basin as a waterfront destination. In 2015 she was recognized by the National Foundation for Women Legislators with the "Elected Women of Excellence" award.

Asked by a reporter in 2013 what she wished her legacy to be, Ms. Sawicki replied, "That I leave Cape Coral in a better place than when I came in... We will have disagreements, and everyone is not going to love me. If that were the case, then I probably am not doing the job I was elected to do. But if I make a difference and it is a better place than when I came in, I have accomplished my goal."

Diane Mack is president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and offers this viewpoint on behalf of the board of directors. She served on the Pensacola City Council 2009-2010.