

Another first for the Pensacola area



Diane Mack

VIEWPOINT

However many firsts Pensacola may count in the course of its history, this one may now be added: The Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida (IWP) was the first, and for three years the only nonpartisan, nonprofit organization in the state of Florida founded for the express purpose of increasing the number of women elected and appointed to public office.

"Firsts" generally become notable when they are followed by "seconds." In September of this year six women at the far southerly end of the state incorporated the Institute for Women in Politics of Southwest Florida on the model that we created here in Pensacola.

It all began when we invited Mayor Marni Sawicki (now Retzer) of Cape Coral to be the keynote speaker at our third annual meeting in June. Ms. Retzer is the first woman to be elected mayor of her city, whose population is three times that of Pensacola. She was a captivating speaker with a great story to tell, she was down-to-earth, and she traveled to Pensacola at

her own expense. She was also thoroughly fascinated by the concept of our institute.

We shared with her our articles of incorporation and bylaws, our objectives and accomplishments, our concerns and strategic plans. On Sept. 19 Mayor Retzer phoned to tell us that there is now an Institute for Women in Politics in her community. While this new organization is not legally affiliated with IWP of Northwest Florida, we are delighted and honored to welcome it as a "sister" institute. For us here in Northwest Florida it is additional validation that what we are striving to do is worth doing.

The initial directors of this sister institute are: **Anita Cereceda**, former mayor of Fort Myers Beach; **Christin Collins**, an executive with Lee Memorial Health System; Rep. **Heather Fitzenhagen**, Florida House District 78; **Linda Prince**, member of the city of Cape Coral Health Facilities Authority; **Marni Sawicki Retzer**, mayor of Cape Coral; and **Jeanne Sweeney**, chief executive office of the Above Board Chamber of Florida.

For the next three years the board of IWP-Northwest Florida has ambitious goals organized around four focus areas:

» Our **Pathway Team** is tasked with making IWP "the inclusive, multipartisan pathway for women in politics." Board member **Lola Presley** and I lead a team

that includes, to date, Gulf Breeze City Council member **Renee Bookout**, **Dr. Laura Dortch-Edler**, and **Myra Van Hoose**.

» Our **Advocacy Team** will work toward making IWP "the respected advocate to advance women in the community" and is headed up by board members **Sharie Bourbeau** and **Deb Corbin**.

✓» Our **Knowledge Team** will undertake to make IWP "the source of local knowledge and information on government and politics" and is led by Board members **Deb Corbin** and **Roz Fisher**.

» Our **Civility Team** is tasked with making IWP "the champion for civility in politics in Northwest Florida." The team is led by Board members **Amy Miller**, **Meghan McCarthy**, and **Rachael Gillette**.

Membership in the Institute is growing. Gen X and early Millennial women are looking at politics and public service with greater interest. And the elections of 2018 and 2020 could well be landmark events in Northwest Florida. Stay tuned.

Diane Mack is past president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and served on the Pensacola City Council 2009-2010. This Viewpoint is offered on behalf of the IWP Board of Directors. To inquire about membership in the Institute, send an email to contact@iwppflorida.org .