

If Fannie could do it, so can we



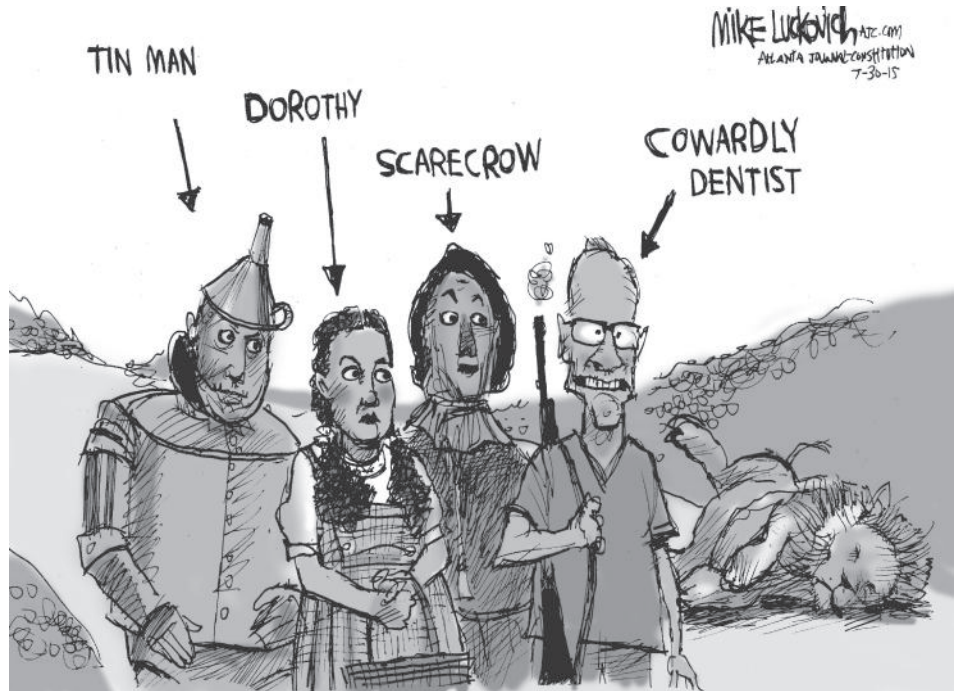
Diane Mack
VIEWPOINT

In June 1924, just four years after women finally won the constitutional battle for the vote, 32-year-old Fannie Salmons, a reporter for the Pensacola News, became the first woman to run for office in Escambia County. She won against seven men for the then District 1 seat on the county commission and took office in January 1925, serving one term that ended January 1927.

Since that time only three other women have served as county commissioners. Muriel Wagner defeated the incumbent District 4 commissioner in 1986, but lost her bid for re-election in 1990. In 2002, when four commissioners were removed from office after being indicted on corruption charges, the governor appointed Marie Young and Janice Gilley to the District 3 and 5 seats. Gilley served out her term and did not run for re-election. Young was re-elected twice and retired in November 2012.

When men consider a public office highly desirable, such as county commissioner or superintendent of schools or mayor, it is difficult for women to compete successfully against them. Over the course of local history, a number of women have competed for these offices and in the process, little by little, smoothed the way for future women candidates. Who were some of these?

A search of the Supervisor of Elections archives from 1960 forward showed that sixteen women have had the fortitude to run for Escambia County Commission seats and to accept defeat. Beginning with Shirley L. Wright in 1960 (this might, however, be a man's name), the list includes Charlene Nimmo (1978), Anna Clark (1988), Robin Bosso Bellan (1990); Jane Magee, Viola Harrison, and Mei Ling Davis (1996);



Gail Fournier, Williemaeb Stanberry, Rita Jones, and Mary Chirico (2000); Georgette Harris, Rita Jones, and Dorothy Davis (2004); Karen Sindel (2010); Tiffany Washington (2012); Deb Moore (2014).

The reason for this walk down memory lane is the 2016 election for the District 1 commission seat. Incumbent commissioner Wilson Robertson is retiring. Though local history includes some notable exceptions, election statistics throughout the country show that women have a better shot at winning a race for an open seat than trying to unseat an incumbent.

Two men have already pre-filed and are actively raising campaign funds. There must be within District 1 a woman who is savvy, well-liked, deeply involved in the community, civic minded, knowledgeable about county and district issues, and ready to offer herself to public service. Whoever that woman might be, we encourage her to enter the

race and we assure her that she may look to the Institute for Women in Politics for advice and campaign training resources.

Women bring a unique set of insights and standard of behavior to any group where men dominate. It has been 90 years since a woman, Fannie Salmons, brought such qualities to the service of District 1. We hope that drought will end next year.

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