

## Politics is local

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### *Filing period ends today for local town offices*

By THOMAS P. CALDWELL, LACONIA DAILY SUN

Former Speaker of the U.S. House Tip O'Neill used to remind people that "All politics is local," and those who want to take that literally will have until 5 p.m. today to get their names on their town election ballots.

By state law, town clerks must remain open until 5 to give registered voters time to sign up as candidates for town office.

If past years are any indication, many of the open positions will have only one candidate or, in some cases, none, leaving it up to write-in votes to decide who fills the office.

Whether it is a seat as a selectman or a library trustee, each of those positions offers a chance to get involved, and it could provide the basis for seeking higher office later on.

Long-time Laconia City Councilor Brenda Baer made that point when leaving her seat on the council this year, and she reiterated the thought during a telephone conversation on Thursday.

"Your local government is the most important one to anybody," she said. "It affects you personally, in every way — taxes, jobs — yet we do nothing about replacing local people or running for office or volunteering. Only 2 percent of the registered voters voted at the last state rep's election.

"The guy who's sitting in Washington didn't get there without starting in local politics," Baer said. "But at the same time, what we do locally affects us more personally every day of our lives, with roads, taxes, schools, fire and police protection, our beaches, our parks. And then, when something happens that you don't like, how do we have the right to complain if we don't vote?"

National campaigns already recognize the importance of grassroots support that can begin with local involvement. The Free State Project is a movement which, in the words of its founder, Jason Sorens, has "freedom-minded people of all stripes ... establish residence in a small state and take over the local government."

Since that essay, composed when Sorens was a 24-year-old graduate student at Yale University, the Free State Project took off, selecting New Hampshire for its political experiment. Today, there are more than 20 Free Staters in the New Hampshire Legislature, representing both Democrats and Republicans.

Sorens, now a lecturer at Dartmouth College, emphasized that the Free State Project is not trying to "take over the state" but, "What we're trying to do is seed the conversation about ideas in this state. We're trying to bring new ideas to the floor about state and local policies. If they're good, they'll stay; if they're not, they'll fall by the wayside."

Emily's List, which promotes a progressive agenda, also has targeted New Hampshire with Focus 2020. "The next congressional redistricting will be led by governors and state legislators elected to office in 2020, a process that will set congressional and legislative districts' boundaries for the next decade," the organization posts on its website. "Focus 2020 will work to flip critical legislative chambers and governorships in 13 key states over the next two election cycles by investing resources strategically and recruiting strong pro-choice Democratic women candidates to run."

New Hampshire is among the 13 states targeted by the campaign.

The New Hampshire Rebellion, founded by Doris "Granny D" Haddock, also formed to make big changes nationally by starting locally. The organization lists itself as a cross-partisan movement of citizens who are "walking the talk to get big money out of politics. ... Inspired by the Declaration of Independence and

Article 10 of the NH Constitution, NH Rebellion is mobilizing the public and demanding presidential candidates to declare their independence from big money in politics.”

## **Apathy, Prejudice, and Change**

Local election officials are combating a level of apathy that often sees voter turnout percentages in the teens or 20s. Voters find even less reason to head to the polls when there are no contests on the ballot.

Yet some of those who do run find themselves unprepared for what they encounter.

Breanna Henderson, who ran for Laconia City Council last year, said, “A lot of people don’t realize or know about what it takes, like basic costs — signs, ads in the paper, and having the time to go door to door.”

She said votes one might count on may disappear if an election is coming during a period when people are out of town.

“If people try to escape in the winter, they’re not around to vote,” she said.

Henderson also was surprised by voter expectations.

“There is the expectation that you should have your mind made up on the issues. There’s an assumption in the public eye that you should have a strong stance on whatever issue someone asks you about.

“You should not have your mind made up; being open-minded is important,” she said.

Henderson said age also can be an issue. While her candidacy resulted in a tie that was resolved by dice roll that went against her, she feels she could have done better if she had been taken more seriously.

“If I did it again, I’d have a couple more years on my side, because there’s a mental line of perception when it comes to age and your ability to do it at a certain age. In a couple of years, I will be past the 30 age, and people then take you more seriously.”

Still, “I made history by doing my first try in Laconia.”

Alvin Nix Jr., who serves as moderator in Belmont, emphasized that there are many town positions where people can contribute to their communities, including serving on budget committees and zoning boards.

“You can perform functions for your town, and it helps for you to be involved,” Nix said. “If you share in participation in town government, that’s what democracy is all about. It takes time and effort, but it’s important to understand how your town works, what’s important to the community — growth and development, or just plain understanding.

“And, too, don’t complain about how politics are today, and how disrespectful or whatever. Get on board and participate, and help change the environment,” Nix said.

He said that, by participating, people also can inspire their neighbors to get involved.

“Don’t be afraid to jump in cold,” Nix said. “We’ll teach you. People sometimes don’t understand that the [New Hampshire] Municipal Association provides training opportunities. Nobody knows it until they do it for the first time.

“Also participate in Town Meeting,” he said. “A deliberative session takes only two to three hours; go to these meetings and learn what’s happening.”

Baer expressed a similar view after her re-election defeat in Laconia.

“Never feel you are not qualified,” she said. “It truly takes every different person to make it work. Age is not a problem. Retired people have the time to spend on many matters. They have a lifetime of experience.

“We need financial people, lawyers, business owners and mostly just people who want to do good. My point is, get involved in your city. You will love it and find it most worthwhile.

Nix summed it up by saying, “You live a community; be part of it. Why not? Help make a decision on where your tax dollars are going to be spent.”

