

Women seek stronger voice on Metro Council

31 female candidates run for 24 seats in Nashville

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Mary Carolyn Roberts used to answer questions about how she was doing by explaining how her then-husband's career was going.



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Now Roberts, 42, is forging her own identity in a very public way as she runs for a Metro Council seat — one of the great majority of seats now held by men.

“Traditionally women were homemakers, and that’s shifting now, and more women see themselves in leadership roles,” said Roberts, who’s trying to unseat incumbent Buddy

Baker in District 20, which represents the area of West Nashville known as The Nations.

Female candidates

More than 30 women are running for Metro offices this year. Incumbents are marked with an “I”:

- Vice Mayor:** Diane Neighbors (I)
Metro Council:
- At-large:** Megan Barry (I), Donna Crawford, Vivian Wilhoite
- District 2:** Gloria Jones
- District 4:** Carolyn Petrone, Renee Rathburn
- District 5:** Priscilla Eaton, Pam Murray
- District 6:** Morelia Cuevas
- District 8:** Karen Bennett (I), Nina Ground, Nancy VanReece
- District 13:** Marilyn Robinson
- District 16:** Anna Page (I)
- District 17:** Lisa Leeds, Sandra Moore (I)
- District 18:** Burkley Allen
- District 19:** Erica Gilmore (I)
- District 20:** Mary Carolyn Roberts
- District 21:** Edith Taylor Langster (I)
- District 22:** Seanna Brandmeir, Sheri Weiner
- District 23:** Emily Evans (I)
- District 24:** Sarah Lodge Tally
- District 27:** Davette Dennison Blalock
- District 28:** Tanaka Vercher
- District 29:** Karen Johnson, Vicky Tataryn
- District 32:** Jacobia Dowell
- District 33:** Page Turner

She’s one of 31 women running for 24 of the 40 council seats in the Aug. 4 elections. Diane Neighbors, the vice mayor and non-voting president of the council, also is running countywide for re-election.

All the activity by female candidates gives advocates hope that women, who make up more than 51 percent of Nashville and Davidson County’s population, can strengthen their representation in the council, where they now hold just nine seats and the vice mayor’s post.

“In the past, one of the pitfalls has been that we haven’t had women running,” said Councilwoman Megan Barry, who is seeking re-election to one of the five at-large seats elected countywide.

“Clearly this year there are a lot of women running exciting, energetic campaigns.”

There were 11 women on the council in the 1999-2003 term, the first time more than five women were elected. The total also reached 11 for about six months in 2009, after Kristine

LaLonde won a special election to fill Keith Durbin's seat and before Pam Murray was recalled and replaced by Jamie Hollin, a man.

Otherwise, the council has never had more than 10 female members since Metro government was formed in 1963. And it's possible that this year's elections won't move the needle much, because there are five men running for every two women.

"We still have a ways to go in terms of having a strong voice and the ability to bring different viewpoints on the council floor," said Karen Johnson, a former Metro school board member who is running for the District 29 council seat in the Antioch/Priest Lake area for the second time. "Women bring unique perspectives and experiences."

Women also are under-represented among Metro's 10 elected constitutional officers, only one of whom is a woman — Public Defender Dawn Deaner. But six of the nine elected school board members are women.

Education "has traditionally been an area that women have taken the lead on," said Jane Ferrell, a consultant who has been involved for years with Women in Numbers, a bipartisan group that has worked since 1992 to train and support female candidates for state and local races.

Not an anomaly

While women don't have the numbers some would like to see in Nashville's elected offices, the city isn't an anomaly by any stretch. According to a recent report by the Congressional Research Service, women hold just 91 of the 535 seats in Congress, or 17 percent.

"Nine out of 40 at the moment looks like the rest of the country," said political scientist Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

"If women are half the population, why aren't they half the leadership? That's a tough one. It goes to history, it goes to culture, it goes to slow, incremental growth."

Mandel said research has shown that many women need explicit

encouragement to run for office and think of themselves as candidates, while men are more likely to be self-starters. “It takes someone to say, ‘What about you?’ ” she said. “Historically, there hasn’t been a welcome mat for women in politics. That’s all changing, but it’s very deep-rooted. Any girl who goes to school and reads history is reading about male leaders. You have to think a bit differently.”

Councilwoman Emily Evans, who is running unopposed for re-election to the seat representing Belle Meade and West Meade, said women traditionally have waited until their children have been old enough to take care of themselves before setting their sights on elected office. Some are intimidated by the need to raise money, which is generally easier for men because of business relationships that confer “instant credibility,” she said.

But Evans said she was pleased to see that a friend, Republican state Rep. Beth Harwell, became speaker of the Tennessee House last winter after a debate about her politics and not fashion, weakness or other common themes surrounding female candidacies over the years.

“Did anyone talk about whether Beth Harwell cries or not? No, they talked about whether she was conservative enough. We may be making some progress here.”

Signs of progress

Lewis Lavine, who once served as chief of staff to former Gov. Lamar Alexander, cited the elections of Harwell and Neighbors and Cornelia Clark’s elevation in 2010 to chief justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court, where two of the other four justices also are women, as signs of progress in the city and state.

“That shows women can move to the top positions,” said Lavine, who now runs the Center for Nonprofit Management. “But it’s still a fairly traditional part of the world. So it takes time.”

Davette Dennison Blalock, an insurance agent, is running for an open council seat in southeast Davidson County. The 39-year-old mother of two small children says she has the listening skills and caring personality to serve the area’s residents, though she expects men to continue outnumbering women on the council, despite Nashville’s demographics.

“I don’t expect as many women to seek any type of political position,” Blalock said. “But we definitely need to keep a good level of balance.”