

Opinion: Four Trenton councilwomen could be contenders in 2014 mayoral race



By [Irwin S. Stoolmacher/Times of Trenton guest columnist](#)

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Last fall, I wrote a column in which [I listed a series of attributes I believe the next mayor of Trenton](#) should possess: empathy, self-confidence, as well as the ability to work cooperatively, see the big picture, develop a shared vision and recruit a talented team to manage the city's affairs. I then listed five individuals who I thought fit the profile: James Gee, James Golden, Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, Keith Hamilton and Eric Jackson.

The group was not a homogenous collection of white Anglo-Saxon male politicians, as it consisted of four black men and New Jersey's first openly gay legislator. However, conspicuously absent were women.

After attending an Emily's List brunch, themed "Strength in Numbers: Women Leading the Way," and reading a recent column by Maureen Dowd, it struck me that, given the abilities and attributes I listed as crucial characteristics for Trenton's next mayor, it was wrong-headed of me not to have included women. Dowd made a very strong case for the value of the female perspective in elective office: "Women reach across the aisle, seek consensus, verbalize and empathize more, manage and listen better. Women are more pragmatic, risk-averse and, unburdened by testosterone, less bellicose."

Likewise, Carol Smith, chief brand officer for the Elle Group, wrote in The New York Times that studies that compare men and women managers agree that "female managers are more collaborative and democratic than male managers ... [and] attend more to the individuals they work with, by mentoring them and taking their particular situations into account."

Similarly, Sharon Meers, a former managing director at Goldman Sachs and co-author of "Getting to 50/50," about working couples, writes that "women often take an alternate approach to leading teams — encouraging more open discussion, cultivating and sharing credit."

Since its founding four decades ago, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, has been making the case for the unique contribution that women in public office make. Repeatedly, its scholarly research has proven that women are agents of change and their presence makes an enormous difference in public policy and the way government operates.

More specifically, CAWP research has found that women officeholders, when compared with their male colleagues, "are more likely to bring citizens into the process, more likely to opt for government in public view rather than government behind closed doors and are more responsive to groups previously denied full access to the policymaking process."

Four women sit on Trenton City Council: Verlina Reynolds-Jackson (East Ward), Kathy McBride (at-large), Marge Caldwell-Wilson (North Ward) and Phyllis Holly-Ward (at-large). Given the current disgraceful situation in City Hall, it is very difficult for any council member to rise above the morass and show that he or she has what it takes to be Trenton's next mayor. Nevertheless, the fact that these four women have managed to make it in the rough-and-tumble world of politics is an

indication that they have the self-confidence required to be mayor.

Among the four women, Kathy McBride, who built her reputation as founder of Mothers Against Violence after her son was killed in a gang-related incident, would appear to have the most political clout. McBride finished first among 11 candidates for city council in a June 2010 runoff election, with 5,339 votes.

I have worked with Marge Caldwell-Wilson in the vineyards of Democratic politics, I know of Phyllis Holly-Ward's work with the Trenton Civic Association and I am aware of Verlina Reynolds-Jackson's commitment to public service during her stints at the Mercer County Board of Social Services and the Department of Community Affairs. They are all articulate, dedicated, engaging elected officials who have shown the ability to work cooperatively with diverse groups in the community.

Whether any of these women has a transformative vision for Trenton and the ability to assemble a team with the talent to execute that vision, I'm not sure. That's what campaigns are for — to see whether a candidate knows the issues and has a plan for addressing the key issues and to get a sense of the type of people they would appoint to key leadership positions.

The days of cronyism and parochialism in hiring in Trenton must end. Trenton desperately needs talent and, for at least the time being, the city's archaic staffing residency requirements should be waived for key administrative positions.

Mercer County elected officials were missing in action when they failed to endorse a candidate in the first round of the last mayoral election. This time around, they need to carefully assess the candidate pool and make their views known to the electorate.

It is also worth noting that two of the three state legislators who represent Trenton are women: Assemblywoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-Ewing) and Sen. Shirley Turner (D-Trenton). Both veteran lawmakers are highly respected and have real political power. If they were to decide that there is a female elected official who is up to the task of leading Trenton, that person would be a viable candidate to succeed Tony Mack in the June 2014 election for the city's next mayor.

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