



LOC Recognizes Local Government People of Color Caucus

By Melody Finnemore

Several members of the Local Government People of Color Caucus, the first caucus recognized by the LOC, were the first person of color to serve on the city council or commission in their communities, and the caucus is celebrating the opportunity to learn from and support each other while paving the way for future generations to fill elected offices.

“As a newly elected person of color, I think it’s important for the other elected people of color to know there is support there,” said Denyse McGriff, Oregon City Commissioner and Caucus President. “There is a changing demographic in the state of Oregon and the LOC, and I think it’s important to have broader representation.”

In October 2020, the LOC Board amended the LOC’s bylaws to recognize caucuses. Following the vote on the bylaws change, the board recognized the Local Government People of Color Caucus. Former Corvallis City Councilor Ed Junkins served as the inaugural president.

The purpose of the caucus is to:

- Promote positive and effective relationships among city officials of color, their communities, political leaders, the LOC and its affiliate entities (such as the Oregon Mayors Association, Oregon City/County Management Association, and the Oregon City Attorneys Association);
- Build and increase capacity of city officials of color and support a pipeline for people of color to engage in and serve in local government;
- Serve as a resource to the LOC in the formulation of its policy agenda; and
- Prepare and advance city officials of color to serve in positions of leadership within the LOC and its affiliate organizations.

There are currently 30 members of the caucus, which is led by its executive team. In addition to President McGriff, the executive team includes:

- Vice President Christopher Lopez, Monmouth Councilor;
- Treasurer Roy Barron, Hermiston Councilor; and
- Secretary Debbie Cabrales, Woodburn Councilor.

“Oregon is becoming more multicultural every day,” said President McGriff. “Our local governments are beginning to reflect that diversity. The League of Oregon Cities is leading the change.



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– Caucus President Denyse McGriff,
Oregon City Commissioner

We’d like to see a representative government that will positively benefit everyone in Oregon.”

Caucus Helps Unite Communities

Happy Valley City Councilor David Emami said he was quick to get involved in the caucus because it provides a space for leaders of color to share their life experiences, some of which are similar while others differ, on both the professional and personal fronts.

“In our state we have elected officials who come from all different walks of life and there are different people in our communities. I think it’s up to our elected officials to make sure everyone has a seat at the table and no one is left behind in having a voice,” he said.



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Emami said one of the caucus' goals is to ensure that people of color serve on each of the LOC's committees, and he is excited to be part of the LOC Bylaws Committee. He said the Local Government People of Color Caucus adds new voices and perspectives to the committees as its members advocate for their communities. And colleagues who have been involved for years are helping newer members be heard, which builds solidarity across the state.

"Our strengths lie in our diversity and I think the League recognizes that our strength is rooted in our diversity. The League has shown they are committed to creating equal opportunities for people of color and equal representation for all. I can't thank them enough for this opportunity," Emami said.

As the Local Government People of Color Caucus carries out its work, Emami is spearheading a task force to improve diversity, equity and inclusion in Happy Valley. The city received a robust response when it requested applications from citizens to participate, and 20 task force members met virtually each month to review each department's processes and make sure they don't create barriers to access to local government. The task force also identified ways to prevent residents from being overlooked or underrepresented.

The city hired a third-party consultant to lead the conversation, and it created a strategic plan that it will implement over the next year based on feedback from the community. "We have a diverse community, and I want to make sure all voices are heard," he said.

Caucus Serves as Extended Family

Lake Oswego City Councilor Daniel Nguyen is the city's first councilor of color and, while he was surprised to learn that, credits strong support from the community for his election.

"It was humbling, but it also comes with a lot of added motivation to make sure we keep this moving in the right direction," he said. "If anything, the past two or three years have taught me

that you may not see people of color in a lot of leadership roles, but people are watching and looking for someone who looks like them. There is room and we need equal representation from members of all communities."

Nguyen's family was not involved in politics, and he did not have much precedent to turn to as he began his work on the city council. He considers his colleagues on the Local Government People of Color Caucus to be a crucial network of support.

"I look at the People of Color Caucus as extended family and we can support each other. Oftentimes, we come across issues we deal with at the city level and we can learn from each other," he said. "We recognize that everyone has a lot in common and the caucus is another way to connect, make sure we are effective in our roles and support each other."

While national politics can sometimes be distracting, Nguyen said, the caucus' goal is to continue its work in representing communities of color as people endure the COVID-19 pandemic, devastating wildfires, civil unrest, and other personal and professional challenges.

"These are unprecedented times and communities of color experience crises in different ways. As leaders it's our job to make sure those voices and perspectives are heard," he said. "This past year has taught us a lot and we need to make sure we bring that voice to city-level decision making."

Nguyen said the long-term goal of the Local Government People of Color Caucus is to make sure its inaugural members serve as a resource for those who come after them and for the greater LOC community.

The Local Government People of Color Caucus meets every other month, generally on the first Friday. Elected officials who are interested in joining the membership of the caucus should email Secretary Cabrales at debbiecabrales@gmail.com and Jenna Jones at jjones@orcities.org. ■

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