

# DEI

## LOC's New Women's Caucus to Provide Training, Support to Foster Female Leadership

By Melody Finnemore

**A**shland City Councilor Paula Hyatt grew up with the ethic that people should use their talents and skills to give back to their communities. She entered public service by volunteering to serve on various boards and committees, including chairing Ashland's Citizens Budget Committee in 2019.

Yet, when people suggested that she run for city council, she declined—several times. A friend suggested that Hyatt join the Emerge America program, which recruits and trains women to serve as leaders in elected offices, before she decided on a city council campaign.

"I found out in the course that most women are asked seven or more times to run and I was, ironically, in that group. I was surprised and not surprised at the same time," she said.

Hyatt, who joined Ashland's City Council last year, said she knew that running for office and earning the seat is only half of the job, however. "What happens when you get there and how do we empower women to serve? The LOC Women's Caucus is well positioned to do just that."

Tanea Browning, Central Point councilor and incoming president of the League of Oregon Cities (LOC), and Amanda Fritz, former Portland city commissioner and LOC Board member, initiated the formation of the LOC Women's Caucus with an email that invited feedback about the idea of an affinity group dedicated to fostering women leaders in elected offices. The list of supporters quickly grew to 100 and continues to swell.

Nearly 50 members of the burgeoning Women's Caucus connected via Zoom in March for an informational meeting and to begin drafting bylaws and outlining goals. The objectives include: providing more opportunities for women in government; training them how to start the process of running to be elected; establishing an internship program; highlighting how women are being represented in government; and developing a platform for a consolidated voice for women in government.

### Caucus Receives Unanimous Support

The Women's Caucus received a unanimous recommendation from the LOC's Equity and Inclusion Committee for its request for formal recognition from the LOC's Board of Directors. Forest



"What happens when you get [in office] and how do we empower women to serve?" – Ashland Councilor Paula Hyatt

Grove Mayor Pete Truax, a member of the committee, told the board, "For too long, it has been the accepted norm that it is enough to not have any barriers to participation by different groups. That cannot be the case anymore.

"Removing those barriers is not enough," he added. "The argument that it is enough to merely not stand in the way does not work anymore. There has to be an active and enthusiastic effort to redress grievances and imbalance."

Hyatt and Philomath Councilor Catherine Biscoe provided testimony on behalf of the caucus, which was unanimously approved for recognition by the LOC Board of Directors during its June 18



"Sometimes there are barriers that women experience and it's not always easy to get those perspectives out there, and yet we make up a big component of our community."  
— *Philomath Councilor Catherine Biscoe*

meeting. Biscoe said the "huge vote of confidence" the Women's Caucus has received during its formation shows the LOC's commitment to diversity in leadership.

"We're seeing a shift in support for women elected officials and a recognition that there is value across the board in bringing this broad cross section of voices from regions across the state and different personalities into government," she said. "I am excited by that. Sometimes there are barriers that women experience and it's not always easy to get those perspectives out there, and yet we make up a big component of our community."

Biscoe said that the Women's Caucus also will strive to bring attention to women elected officials across the state who might not be publicly known. She described the caucus' formation as not only an opportunity to cultivate and support new leadership, but also provide another means for the LOC to educate people about the resources it provides throughout Oregon.

She noted the LOC Board's unanimous approval and the energy Browning brings to the organization reflect "an amazing amount of allyship."

### **New Members Encouraged to Join**

Browning said the Women's Caucus is the most recent result of the LOC's strategy to ensure elected leadership, and its own leadership, represent the diverse communities that make up

Oregon's population. She noted that the LOC implemented these goals, which go beyond policy decisions and include operations, in its strategic plan in 2019.

"This was all before 2020, which saw COVID-19 as well as an increase in conversations related to digital equity, social justice and more," she said.

Fritz said she felt the timing for the Women's Caucus was right with Browning moving up the LOC leadership ladder to become the first female president since 2009 and her ending 12 years on the Portland City Council, including eight where she was the only woman serving.

"In the coming years, I look forward to seeing the Women's Caucus support and nurture women elected to city councils, including helping participants get to know leaders in areas of the state far from their own, thus working towards understanding and mutual respect," Fritz said. "I want incoming LOC President Tanea Browning to know she has a huge team supporting her, with opportunities for input on LOC policies and positions from women all over Oregon."

Fritz added that she looks forward to seeing women from all parts of the state step up to serve in the 13 leadership positions on the Caucus Board, or as a Women's Caucus representative on LOC committees.

"One of the challenges women and people of color face is that slots on councils, boards and committees are limited in number, and the formation of the Women's Caucus, as well as the People of Color Caucus, made the tables bigger, so more people from underrepresented communities can serve and shine," she said.

The Women's Caucus is welcoming new and interested members. Both current and former city council members are eligible to join, and women serving as appointed members of city boards and commissions may participate as Associate members. Caucus members will vote to elect its officers and board during the LOC Annual Conference in October.

Its members are establishing representation on all of LOC's committees and will be increasingly involved in outreach. Ashland Councilor Hyatt said the group will continue to meet by Zoom, and the meetings are scheduled for noon on the third Tuesday of each month.

"It's really cool sitting in on the Zooms to interact and talk with women across the state and hear what they are working on in towns of various sizes, and yet there is a thread of community and we are able to develop supportive relationships," she said.

Jayme Hafner, LOC's staff liaison to the Women's Caucus, also was involved in the formation of LOC's People of Color Caucus and said she appreciates being part of the effort to increase diversity, equity and inclusion within government leadership.

"It's been pretty interesting to see the similarities and the differences between the two affinity groups," she said. "Their vision of how to change the status quo has been fascinating." ■

*Those interested in learning more about the LOC Women's Caucus can contact Jayme Hafner at [jhafner@orcities.org](mailto:jhafner@orcities.org).*