

## **Women design a Trenton makeover**

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**BY DEBORAH HOWLETT**

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A surprising fact of New Jersey politics is how few women have been elected to public office.

None of the state's 15 seats in Congress is held by a woman. Of its 51 elected governors, one was female. Just 19 of the 120 lawmakers in the Statehouse are women, a smaller percentage than in all but nine states and on par with Mississippi and Alabama.

Some of the most notable advocates for women in New Jersey gathered yesterday in Trenton to announce the launch of Women Advocating for Good Government, a group dedicated to changing those statistics.

"Too often we have been the stuffers and schleppers in politics," said Myra Terry, a founder of the group. "We have had limited opportunities to run for seats. We have been very patient. Our state desperately needs a makeover, and women are really good at that."

The bipartisan group will focus on "grassroots" efforts -- distributing palm cards at supermarkets, malls and Starbucks as well as hosting coffees at private homes -- in four Assembly races.

It will support two incumbents who are in closely contested races, said Joan Wright, a former Democratic legislator who helped organize the group.

Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein (D-Mercer) is running in the split 14th District and Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk (R-Bergen) faces a rival ticket that includes a woman candidate in the Democratic-leaning 39th District.

The group is also backing two challengers with good prospects for winning election.

Monmouth Republican Amy Handlin defeated incumbent GOP Assemblyman Joe Azzolina in the primary for the 13th District. Camden Democrat Pamela Rosen Lampitt is running with Assemblyman Louis Greenwald, the Democratic chairman of the Assembly budget committee, in the 6th District.

"We have a clear mission: increase the number of women in the Legislature and at other levels of government," Wright said.

In a state where women comprise 57 percent of the electorate and 40 percent of the business owners, Terry said, women ought to have a larger presence.

The idea of forming a grassroots activist group dedicated to local races was conceived over cocktails before the New Jersey legislative correspondents' dinner, an annual roast of lawmakers by the Statehouse press corp. It was clear from the crowd that politics in New Jersey is a male bastion. Lois Redisch, a Bergen county activist who wrote a column for the Web site politicsnj.com, approached Terry, director of the Women's Fund of New Jersey, and said something had to be done.

The two women organized for a year and held the group's first formal meeting in May. It drew 100 people. Redisch died in June, but Terry has carried on.

"Women have enormous power; far more power than we realize," said Handlin, the Republican candidate and a Monmouth University professor who has written a study of the 1998 congressional campaigns, "Whatever Happened to the Year of the Woman?"

"A man can't speak in a woman's voice," Handlin said. "We need to make sure our voices are clearly heard."

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