

DiAnne Gove - “Trained, Fit and Ready”

By Timothy Hart

DiAnne Gove (R-9) has become only the sixth woman to represent Ocean County in the New Jersey Legislature in the 90 years since women have won the right to vote. Ms. Gove's election is an opportunity to reflect on the changing perception of women in Ocean County politics and civic life.

DiAnne Gove is a retired AP history teacher at Southern Regional High School who has the opportunity to put her civic lessons to practical use. No stranger to public service, she has been a role model and trailblazer as a teacher, civic leader, and elected official. Ms. Gove received many favorable comments from both men and women that her election would result in a female representative in Ocean County for the first time in fifteen years. She hopes that we have come to a point that people “vote for the person who is best qualified.”

New Jersey has a mixed history on Women's Suffrage: the first state to recognize the right of women to exercise their right to vote and a state that has many cases of turning back from that auspicious beginning.

The New Jersey constitution of July 2, 1776, allowed “all inhabitants...of full age” (Article IV) who were worth at least 50(£) to vote. Either through accident or the intention of Joseph Cooper, a Quaker legislator at the time, this provision did not use the word “man” and therefore allowed thousands of free Blacks and women of property (widows or unmarried women since a married woman's wealth belonged to her husband) to vote until a law in 1807 limited the vote to “white, males.” These restricted words were used in the 1848 constitution of New Jersey.

Noted historian Cynthia C. Smith has written extensively on women in Ocean County politics. Ms. Smith relates that Ocean County was the only county to pass the New Jersey referendum on Women's Suffrage of October 19, 1915. Ocean County was “heralded all over the nation as the one (bright) spot on the New Jersey map,” including a complimentary editorial by the New York Times. An apocryphal story relates that an indignant Ocean County man responded to the New York Times compliment with an apology that the county men had only voted in favor of suffrage at the insistence of their wives.

Women in New Jersey were denied the right to vote until the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 26, 1920. A New Jersey Quaker, Alice Paul, from nearby Moorestown in Burlington County, played a major part in the national fight to convince one time New Jersey governor Woodrow Wilson to support the recognition of women's right to vote.

To date, only six women have represented Ocean County in the New Jersey Assembly: Lila W. Thompson (1923-1925), Lettie E Savage (1940-1959), Hazel F. Gluck (1979-1981), Marlene Lynch Ford (1983-1985, 1989-1991), Virginia E. Haines (1991-1994), and DiAnne C. Gove (2009-).



File Photo

*6th woman to represent Ocean County in
NJ Legislature (R-9)*

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Lila Thompson was the first woman elected in Ocean County. The attached image is a facsimile of an original glass slide shown at Stager's Music Hall, the Manahawkin silent movie theatre. The standard of "trained, fit, and ready" is a high bar for anyone seeking public office. "In 1923, Thompson ran for Ocean County's only assembly seat and was elected the first woman in New Jersey to represent an entire county in the New Jersey legislature. In 1924, she ran again and, as before, was easily elected" (Cynthia Smith in *Ocean County: Four Centuries in the Making*).

Each of the women who have represented Ocean County has broken more than one barrier: Hazel Gluck was the first and so far only female Ocean County Freeholder, Marlene Lynch Ford is the first female Ocean County prosecutor, and DiAnne Gove is the second female commissioner and first female mayor in more than 100 years of Long Beach Township.

One may ask to judge the progress for women in politics. On the one hand, political equity has not been achieved. No New Jersey woman currently serves in the U.S. House of Representatives. But on the other hand, women have made significant gains. According to the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Rutgers University, New Jersey currently has the 12th highest percentage of women in the state legislature among the nation's legislatures; Kim Guadagno is the first lieutenant governor, Assemblywoman Sheila Y. Oliver (D-Essex, Passaic) is the first African-American woman to be the Speaker of the Assembly; and Senator Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex) is the first woman to serve as Senate Majority Leader.

Perhaps the most significant development is that women in politics are no longer a novelty. The issue has changed from "if" a woman can balance the multiple responsibilities of political office, family, career, and possible caretaker of children and/or parents to "how" they will juggle or balance these many responsibilities. Young women are much less bound by the expectations of the past. Some young women are surprised that a woman has never been president of the United States or that New Jersey has never elected a female United States Senator. In fact, many young women fail to even notice that a woman has broken a barrier when she becomes the first woman to hold some significant political office.

Ocean County was the only New Jersey county to vote for suffrage in 1915 in the first state to recognize a woman's right to vote in 1776. Today, we are represented by a woman of the highest qualifications and dedication who is clearly "trained, fit, and ready."

March is Women's History Month – please check: www.theoceancountylibrary.org for local events. Also check the Center for American Women & Politics at Eagleton Institute for more information on Women in New Jersey politics. www.cawp.rutgers.edu



Stafford Historical Society