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nj contents

Volume 96 | Issue 1, January 2019



Features

6 UpFront: NJLM President Q&A

Mayor Colleen Mahr of Fanwood discusses her presidential plans at the League

20 Focus: Governor Murphy Addresses League

Speaks at League Conference Luncheon on achievements and priorities

Governor Phil Murphy

24 Focus: Innovation in Governance

Smart Planning Recognized

32 2018 Great Places in New Jersey Designations

Sheena Collum, Executive Director, New Jersey Chapter of the American Planning Association; Village President, South Orange

36 EDA Calls on Municipalities

Group explores Innovation Challenge in support of Governor's plan
Tim Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer, NJ Economic Development Authority

40 NJ Local Government Week Launched

NJLM rolls out new program to boost municipal pride

NJLM

50 2019 Legislative Priorities

52 Meet Your New Board Member(s)

53 Annual Mayors' Hall of Fame

54 League Approves New Resolutions

56 103rd Annual NJLM Conference Wrap Up



6

Departments

4 222 West State Street
Michael J. Darcy, CAE

10 NJ Now
Taran Samhammer & Amy Spiezio

15 Now & Then
Amy Spiezio

16 Trenton Op Ed
Assemblymen Joseph Howarth & Ryan Peters

18 Trenton Op Ed
Assemblyman John DiMaio

44 Finance Center
Edward J. McManimon, III, Esq.

46 Legal
Frank Marshall, Esq.

48 Gold Dome
Benjamin Dworkin, Ph.D.

62 Business Card Directory

64 Around the State/Supporters

32



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Seaside goldenrod in Barnegat Light NJ
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“The direction and leadership of the League Executive Board has enabled this organization to thrive both in its reputation and its contribution to good government.”

Up to the Challenge: NJ’s Municipal Leaders Are Moving Mountains

The focus of this issue of *New Jersey Municipalities* is leadership. As local governing officials, you are going through your annual leadership reorganization just as the League has completed its own.

Being local leaders, you provide the critical vision and direction for your community. You are to be congratulated for doing that within the parameters of New Jersey municipal government. Leadership is not easy, even in the simplest environment. Add the complexity of local government, and leadership becomes a multi-layered challenge.

To assist you with your leadership challenges, the League offers specialized education for elected officials each winter. These full-day programs include speakers who are specialists in the complex functional sections of local government. They can help you navigate those areas with the goal of helping you be an effective local leader. Other presentations focus on your leadership role in coordination with your municipal professionals. And, of course, there is the important opportunity to network and exchange ideas with your peers from other municipalities.

Because so much of your ability to implement new ideas relies on your budget, in March the League offers a specially designed program on “Budgeting for the Elected Official.” It goes beyond understanding the legal requirements to include discussions of the practical aspects of budgeting and the necessary accounting for external pressures. (For more information, visit www.njslom.org/seminars)

As you continue to add to your knowledge with training that benefits your municipal leadership, I urge you to register for the Local Government Leadership Program. This voluntary League program offers you a way to structure and track your advancement in knowledge as a municipal leader. Just as important, you are recognized by the League as you achieve each of three levels. See more about the Local Government Leaders Program at the League website www.njslom.org/lglp

On another note, you should have great confidence in the leadership of your League Executive Board. For example, within two weeks of being sworn in as League President Colleen Mahr, Mayor of Fanwood, joined by 2nd Vice President Janice Kovach, Mayor of Clinton Town, convened meetings with the Governor’s office and Senate President Sweeney. They pressed the municipal perspective on several issues to ensure your views were clearly communicated first-hand. Read more from League President Mayor Mahr in this issue.

The direction and leadership of the League Executive Board has enabled this organization to thrive both in its reputation and its contributions to good government. The League is able to do that because of the Executive Board’s encouragement to find more new and effective strategies to address challenges and seize opportunities. When the Executive Board makes the tools available and sets the direction, the League volunteers and staff can move mountains.

I hope in 2019 the League can help you and your staff move mountains. 🏔️

Michael Darcy

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UpFront: Leadership

Q & A

with the
**New League
President**

Mayor Colleen Mahr
of Fanwood discusses
her presidential plans
at the League



What led you to get involved in local government in Fanwood?

I come from a family with a meaningful history of public service. My mother, Nancy, was a special assistant to two Governors, Gov. Brendan Bryne and Gov. James Florio. My father, Joseph, was president of First Savings Bank, based in Middlesex County. I grew up at the kitchen table hearing about both politics and community service, so I was bitten by the public service bug early on.

I worked for Mayor Jerry McCann at the City of City Jersey, and that's where my love of public service was born. I stayed on through the term of Mayor Brett Schundler, and it was during my time in Jersey City that I understood that there's a place for government in our lives, and if harnessed correctly, it can be transformative and do great things.

After I worked for Jersey City, I really understood the power local municipalities have—their ability to really help their residents.

When I moved to Fanwood, I was approached to be involved with the local Democratic organization, which led me to run for mayor.

What are your goals as League President?

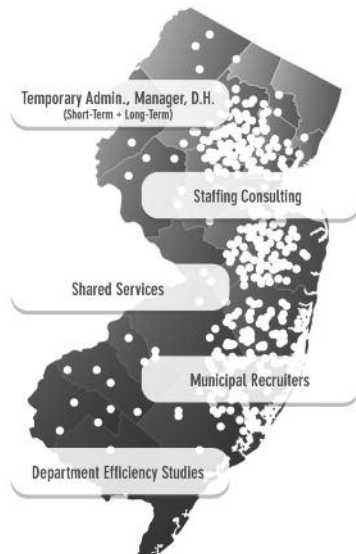
The League should be a bigger resource for our elected officials, whether they've been in office for six months or six years.

By the end of my one-year term I hope to engage a larger group of mayors—regardless of how long they have been in office—in League advocacy. Because the League is the voice of all 565 municipalities, it's extremely important that the dynamic diversity that makes up New Jersey is heard.

Diverse advocacy is important because there is a need for specific municipal input when it comes to crafting legislation that impacts local government. There are always pieces of legislation that don't necessarily have enough municipal input, and we need to change that paradigm.

One example for advocacy called for this year is the legalization of recreational cannabis: this is first and foremost a local issue. It will be municipalities that will lead the way in terms of how this new industry succeeds. This is where the participation by our mayors is really key, so that legalization, which seems to be inevitable, reflects the concerns raised by local leaders.

At the same time, there are issues we are not going to give up on and go away from, including:



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Township of Woodbridge

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Township of Denville

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Township of Aberdeen

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Mayor Richard Onderko
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Best Municipal Government Advisors I've met in 10 years in elected office. Helped us recruit a fantastic Administrator. Thanks Dan and JPM.



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- **Affordable Housing:** New Jersey needs a reasonable and rational housing policy, and must involve local leaders in crafting that policy.
- **CMPTRA:** Local officials must work together to protect and get back Energy Gross Receipts or CMPTRA tax relief funding.
- **Interest Arbitration Cap:** The State enacted a permanent 2% levy cap, and local officials will continue their calls to restore the 2% cap on interest arbitration awards.

What advice would you give to someone just elected to local office for the first time?

Call me! My advice, in all seriousness, would be to reach out to someone

like myself or to call the League. We'll come and visit, we'll come to your community. I know for a lot of brand-new officials, they take the first year to take it all in until they can find their voices. The League can be a resource so that maybe they find their voices a little earlier or that maybe they have confidence in what's going on because we help reinforce what they need to know.

Also, it's important for women who read this to know that I'm a mother of three boys—I'm raising a family, I'm working, and I'm serving—I think that's important for people to understand and see they can do it. That's not an easy balance, but the rewards of public service are so deep and meaningful—it's amazing how you can forget the stress and the anxiety and the pain! You're in the trenches and then you have that great feeling of cutting the ribbon to a new business, or bringing in a new development that makes sense, or coming in with flat municipal tax. In those moments, you realize why you're doing it.

What do citizens expect from their municipal officials, and has that changed at all over the years?

Residents are tax-weary. It's a repeated theme: we are overtaxed, we are among the most expensive states in the nation, and we need to be able to keep our senior citizens and what could be seen as a dwindling middle class in New Jersey. Property taxes and affordability is the number-one reason that people are leaving our state. It's unfortunate that this is the same discussion that was going on when I was elected in 2004.

The expectation of our residents is to



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– Kathryn, 2016 graduate

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keep our towns affordable, so taxes have consistently been a concern. The quality of services and what people expect for the money they are spending to live in our communities are also important.

They expect our municipal services will be at a high level. They expect the town to be very transparent and to frequently and clearly communicate. They also expect us to be good stewards of their hard-earned money, and they expect us to keep their property taxes stable. I believe that's exactly what mayors and governing bodies do.

“Municipalities are the collectors of the local, school, and county tax components, yet often we control what could be seen as the smallest part of the total percentage.”

I think residents understand more today than 15 years ago that the bulk of their property taxes, in some communities as much as 65%, goes directly to their Boards of Education. As we sit here today, there is discussion of additional funding for school aid going out to our communities. I believe that there is an expectation that those additional dollars that will come into the largest portion of anyone's tax bill will help to reduce the tax levy.

Municipalities are the collectors of the local, school, and county tax components, yet often we control what could be seen as the smallest part of the

total percentage.

There is frustration trying to work within a 2% cap, to watch what state aid municipalities have gotten over the years be clawed back. For instance, our energy gross receipts/CMPTRA funding, which is rightfully ours, has been swept into the state coffers and they will not

give it back to us. There are tons of unfunded state mandates and regulations on the books; it is like death from a thousand cuts to local governments to provide what residents expect because of the burdens and regulations and the lack of property tax relief that comes back to municipalities.



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What are the greatest strengths of local government in New Jersey?

Over the last 15 years, I have had the pleasure to know hundreds of mayors. They work tirelessly, 24/7. Whether new or long-term office holders, I have seen their passionate commitment to make their communities the best they possibly can be—we do it because we truly believe we can make a difference.

Local governments are great at responding quickly under adverse conditions and also work really hard at providing a good quality of life to the residents of New Jersey.

Mayors and Municipalities are finding opportunities to leverage their best assets, including redevelopment opportunities, shared services, and environmental leadership. Whether that's the parks, recreation programs, senior citizens, department of public works, the libraries, fire departments, or police departments, Municipalities embrace and are proud of how they do what they do. That's what really makes New Jersey unique.

How would you describe your leadership style; what motivates you as a leader?

My leadership style has evolved over the years that I have been Mayor. Today, I'm in my fourth term, my 15th year. I view myself as someone who is very approachable—it's important to be seen and heard in my community.

I'm a big believer that there are so many good stories to tell, and that it's our first job to make sure that our residents understand what's going on within their community. We have a public access station, and, before the birth of Facebook,

newsletters and public access television were how we primarily communicated with people. As the communications tools have evolved and gotten more sophisticated, we have continuously adapted.

Since economic development is really key to the success of our town—part of the transformation of Fanwood has been its redevelopment—we do a big focus with

the show "Inside Fanwood." Going into the business community, we make two-minute videos where I visit each of the stores and talk to them about why they chose Fanwood and what they offer. My goal is to bring our business community to the people and get them excited to see what we've worked so hard to create together: a vibrant downtown. 🇯🇵

Women in Municipal Government

From when I started to today, there are less women holding the title of mayor—our numbers have decreased, not increased. Looking back to when I took office in 2004, I was one of 86 women mayors. Today, I am one of 73. Maybe that number will rise in 2019, but the reality is that the percentage of women holding elected positions is low. Women mayors are about 13% of the whole, and women on governing bodies are hovering around 27%.

It's critically important that women see other women in positions of power. You can be a mother and a leader. I have three boys that are ages 12, 14, and 16, I have a job, and I serve my community. One of the reasons I choose to run for reelection after all these years is that I don't want the numbers to shrink any more than they have.

Happily, what I've seen in the last two years is a much louder, well-organized, grassroots movement spearheaded by women who want to see other women in office. My focus has always been on the local level, and that was a shared reason why a core group of women decided to revamp the League's Women in Municipal Government (WIMG) committee and focus on highlighting women at the League's Annual Conference. For the past two years, we've held a networking and awards event where 300-plus women took the time out of their busy conference schedules to connect and recognize achievements.

My hope is that when people read this they understand the importance of having women in municipal government, and maybe it moves someone from thinking about it to actually running for office. It's very important that women are represented and are elected.





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