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Female office-holders encourage more women to run

By PETE NICKEAS - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Saturday, April 24, 2010 1:30 am

About 90 women gathered at Casper College on Friday for a conference aimed at nudging women toward political office.

The Wyoming Women's Legislative Caucus brought together a diverse group of women for seminars outlining the steps for seeking political office.

Among the group were current and former legislators, nonprofit organizers, a Casper city councilwoman, students and members of Wyoming's business community.

State Rep. Rosie Berger, R-Sheridan, said the event was designed to "plant the seed" of public service in the minds of women.

The day's events focused on finding a "voice" and using it to advance careers or political ambitions.

Former Colorado House Speaker Lola Spradley, the first woman to hold that position, told of her initial reluctance to enter politics and -- since winning a House seat -- working to improve her standing.

"Don't ever think you've arrived," she said. "You have to keep working on that message ... you have to back up, start over, and keep presenting."

Wyoming's Legislature doesn't reflect the state's demographics: 49 percent of the state's residents are women, but only 15 of the 90 members of the state House and Senate are women.

"In the legislative body, [there are] 90 people between the House and the Senate, and there's 15 women," Berger said. "Women bring another perspective and balance to the politics and policy."

Aiming to tap into that perspective, conference organizers and participants said women mulling a run for office -- whether a school board, city council or legislative seat -- should seek mentors.

"I had many mentors, not all women. But I had strong women in my life, and they gave me confidence," said Clarene Law of Jackson, a legislator from 1991 to 2004. "Too many people are afraid to fail."

Law, with admittedly more legislative and political experience than most women in the room, said she's often asked about running for office.

"Most women are prepared to serve. You have to ID an area and some interest they have a passion for," she said. "I ask them, 'Do you really want to do it? What do you expect to get out of it? Are you willing to spend the time?' It's a great journey. It will produce them as a larger person, and they will be happier to have given."

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