

TIME TO THINK ABOUT RUNNING FOR PUBLIC OFFICE

Westport has almost 50 boards, commissions and committees of appointed and elected officials, all volunteers. Over 250 Westport residents dedicate their time regularly, on a monthly, weekly, sometimes daily basis toward making our town a better place to live. Fifty-three of the 85 elected positions are up for election this year: the First Selectman and 2 Selectmen positions, 4 positions on the Board of Education, 3 positions on the Board of Finance, 3 positions on the Planning and Zoning Commission, 2 positions on the Zoning Board of Appeals, 2 positions on the Board of Assessment Appeals, and all 36 positions on the Representative Town Meeting (RTM).

Perhaps it's time for you to run for one of these positions.

Why would you want to run for public office? Maybe you want to put your skills to work for the town you love. Maybe you want to make changes. Maybe you feel a sense of duty to participate actively in town government because you believe that this participation, this process, is what is necessary for a democracy to work. The reasons for running are as different as each elected or appointed official is.

If you're thinking of running for one of the board, commission or RTM positions that are open for new candidates this fall, how do you get started? First, estimate how much time and money it will cost to campaign. Campaigning for a local election need not be expensive, but you may want to create promotional material. Having confidence that you can devote the necessary resources will effectively set a tone for success in your campaign.

To prepare yourself, start with the Town's website at westportct.gov. Here you can find out more about the responsibilities of each elected office, Board and Commission and find meeting schedules. Start attending the meetings that interest you. Consider whether you have the time to devote to preparing for and attending meetings, studying the issues, and communicating with constituents and fellow officials.

All of Westport's elected boards and commissions are bi-partisan, except for the RTM. For bi-partisan election to boards and commissions, candidates can either run with a party endorsement from the local Democratic or Republican Town Committees or without either such endorsement. To seek an endorsement from your party, contact the Chair of the respective committee: Jim Ezzes of the Democratic Town Committee by phone at 227-4861 or by email at jezzes@westportdemocrats.com or Bob Zappi of the Republican Town Committee by phone at 454-9650 or by email at bobzappi@optonline.net.

Both respective Committees interview prospective candidates and incumbents for open positions and determine whom to endorse. This process begins in the spring and concludes in July when the Town Committees meet to decide endorsements and are required to report their endorsed candidates to the Town Clerk's office.

Running without a party endorsement is more difficult, but it can be done. The first step is to obtain an application for a “nominating petition” from the Elections Services Division of the Secretary of State’s Office (phone number: 800-540-3764 or online at sots.ct.gov) and obtain voters’ signatures equal to at least one percent of the number of votes cast in the last similar local election. The Elections Services Division makes the computation of the signature requirements. This petition needs to be returned to the Town Clerk’s office by early August, this year by 4:00 p.m. on Wednesday, August 5th and, after certification, you will then be a “petitioning candidate.”

Alternatively, you could file papers to create your own political party to endorse and support your candidacy. Instructions about the application process for all types of candidates are available on the Secretary of State’s website at sots.ct.gov.

If you are interested in volunteering on an *appointed* town board or commission, contact First Selectman Gordon Joseloff by mail at 110 Myrtle Avenue, by phone at 341-1111, or by e-mail at selectman@westportct.gov to find out more about this process. To find out about being appointed as an *alternate* on an elected board or commission, contact its chair.

Westport’s Representative Town Meeting, which is the town’s legislative body and is made up of 36 elected representatives, is nonpartisan. To run for the RTM, you begin the process by picking up a petition at the Town Clerk’s office during a certain time period, which this year starts on Tuesday, July 21th. After gathering 25 signatures of registered voters in your district, you must return the petition to the Town Clerk by a certain date, which this year is Tuesday, September 8th. District maps and voter lists are available at the Town Clerk’s office at Town Hall. Once the returned petition is certified by the Town Clerk, your name will be placed on the ballot as a candidate to represent your district. That’s when the campaign officially begins.

HOW TO CAMPAIGN EFFECTIVELY

So you’ve decided to throw your hat in the ring and run for public office. What’s the best way to develop your message, and how do you get that message out?

You should prepare about 35 words that spill easily out of your mouth as you follow the time-honored tradition of greeting people and shaking hands at the Westport train station, the Westport dump, and at supermarkets. Westporters like to meet their candidates in person, so walking door to door is a valuable use of time, and critical to your campaign. Develop an “elevator speech” to quickly impress voters with your ideas, goals and credentials. Be prepared to explain succinctly and quickly why you are running.

Create a postcard or flyer containing your very best photograph. Take the time to have this picture done right; it is key to your message. In the postcard or flyer, state your views, priorities and qualifications, and show your connection to the voters. If you

decide to raise funds to pay for these materials, familiarize yourself with relevant campaign finance laws. The Connecticut State Elections Enforcement Commission's website describes the laws for municipal elections at ct.gov/seec/lib/seec/publications/mg_final_2009_auto.pdf

Your mailer can be impressive without going over-board. Get it printed in time and mail it to all of the voters who should receive it. Mailing lists of the Town's registered voters are available in the Registrars of Voters office at Town Hall. The rules for yard signs are available at the Town Clerk's office. Enlist a special group of friends to generate glowing letters about your character and experience for publication in the local newspapers. This is a very effective tool to establish your credibility.

Be pro-active. Scour through the papers, local magazines, and other news outlets to find forums where you can speak to voters. Call organizations, establish a connection to them, and many times you will discover a wonderful speaking opportunity.

If you are running for the Board of Selectmen, Board of Education, Board of Finance, Planning and Zoning Commission or the Zoning Board of Appeals, The League of Women Voters of Westport will invite you to participate in its Candidates' Forums, which are held about a month before the election. Study the important issues in town to prepare to answer voters' questions. Your goal is to get your name, your goals and your qualifications out to as many people as possible before Election Day.

Prepare a well-written and carefully proof-read response for the League's *Voters Guide*, which is published shortly before Election Day. In late September, the League sends questions to all candidates who will be on the ballot and publishes all of the responses. The *Voters Guide* is distributed town-wide, and it is the only written material that is allowed to be brought into the voting booth.

Most important, let your enthusiasm show.

Prepared as a public service announcement by the League of Women Voters of Westport.