

WOMEN MAYORS DEMONSTRATE LEADERSHIP ALONG NORTH STRAND

BY JO ANN MATHEWS

For The Sun News

“A public body should have women,” says Joyce Dunn, mayor of Carolina Shores, N.C. “We really need to get more women in politics. I try to get women to run.”



From Left to Right: Smith, Knight, Dunn, Hatley

Dunn along with Debbie Smith of Ocean Isle Beach, N.C. and Mary Louise Knight of Calabash, N.C. are mayors at the south end of Brunswick County. Marilyn Hatley is mayor of neighboring North Myrtle Beach.

“There were people who doubted I could handle the job,” she says. However, she’s held the position since 2001 after serving five years on the city council.

These four women pursued careers in diverse capacities yet chose to enter the political arena because they saw a need for change and wanted to serve their communities.

Figures from the Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University in New Jersey show that women hold around 20 percent of positions in national government while it hovers around 25 percent in state government.

It cites the U.S. Conference of Mayors data that shows from January 2016, of the 1,391 mayors of U.S. cities with populations over 30,000, women held 262 mayoral positions, which is 18.8 percent. This includes seven women in North Carolina and one in South Carolina (Mount Pleasant). No data is collected for the nearly 20,000 smaller municipal governments.

Each of these mayors featured here enumerated concerns she has that her individual town faces, yet all mentioned improvement of storm water systems and explained how they successfully managed the major storms that hit the area, including Hurricane Matthew.

Each emphasized that meeting the needs of the residents and listening to residents are top priorities.

Knight, former director of social services for a nursing home chain and former owner of adult day care centers in Bucks County, Pa., says the survey Calabash conducted indicated what residents want. The Number One request was a place to walk. The town now has sidewalks down Beach Drive, its main corridor, and a park at Persimmon Road and Traders Lane.

“It’s the best thing ever,” Knight says. “It’s been very healthy for us. Calabash is over 50 percent senior citizens.”

A senior center is coming their way, and Knight is working on interconnecting the subdivisions to make a cohesive entity. She adds that she’s been accepted as mayor and she’s honored the electorate chose her. “I’m very available to the [1,800] citizens,” she says. “We have a lot of service organizations, and if they call on me to speak, I’ll do it.” Dunn, former state director of AARP in Mississippi and Kentucky and assistant state director of AARP in North Carolina, leads the 3,767 residents of Carolina Shores. “My passion is talking to constituents,” she says. She explains the big challenge is bringing the six areas of the town together. “We don’t have a community gathering place,” she says. “We want to have outdoor activities, a park, a place for people to get together. We are trying to be fair and are dealing with the diversity in the town.”

(Women Mayors Cont.)

She explains that a major challenge is convincing residents that the elected officials are working toward solving problems.

“The people think we’re not doing anything,” she says. “Things are invisible until fruition.”

Hatley, a certified teacher of cosmetology and business owner and one of the founders of Coastal Carolina National Bank, has guided the city of nearly 15,000 residents to unprecedented growth. The expansion of shopping facilities, the sports complex, the parks and the aquatic and fitness center are a few of the amenities added to the city since she became mayor. The fitness center caused some controversy, but “now it’s one of the most popular places we have,” Hatley says. “It’s busy 12 months of the year. The facility meets all health issues.”

Smith of Ocean Isle Beach owns and operates Sloane Realty/Coldwell Banker and Ocean Isle Inn. She was elected to the OIB town board in 1983 and was elected mayor in 2003. “I never had any opponents,” she says and adds, indicating her keen sense of humor, “Either nobody else wants the job or I’m doing the right things.”

A primary concern she has for the 620 permanent residents of OIB is protecting the coast and its environment. “I want to keep some sand on the beach and do anything else Ocean Isle Beach needs,” Smith says. “I like doing things for my community and taking care of issues.”

The question of whether women govern differently than men continues to be debated. At www.debate.org, 40 percent of those interviewed said women govern differently than men while 60 percent said no, they don’t. www.vox.com, a media news site, states, “Women bring a different background to Congress. They face different obstacles to success — and sometimes more obstacles to winning office. That shapes how they govern and what issues they choose to focus their time on.”

“In a crisis women want to make sure everything is okay,” Dunn says. “A woman thinks about people right away.” Yet she believes a balance of men and women governing is important. “They come from different directions. A blending is important,” she says.

“We really need to get more women in politics. I am proud to see women accept offices.”

“Men and women think differently,” Smith says. “Women often have different styles in governing and in business. I want to resolve an issue. I won’t hold a grudge.”

Hatley, who founded Coastal Alliance for Mayors of our Coastal Communities, says she prides herself on being a good administrator. “I work closely with the council. I want to unify rather than divide.”

Knight echoes the sentiment. “I’m looking to enhance Calabash as a town, not change it,” she says.

Despite snags during their tenures, these women will probably run again when their terms expire. They see more improvements to be made and problems to solve.

“It’s a rewarding job to serve your community,” Smith says.

“It’s public service. It’s not a power position.”

Hatley expresses how all these women feel about their individual communities. “I just love the city of North Myrtle Beach, but I don’t do it alone,” she says.

Freelance writer Jo Ann Mathews can be contacted at jamathews124@gmail.com.