

### Women's group explains the political endorsement process

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Patrick Miles LEGAL NEWS PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA PRICE

Political Action Committees, or PACs, can develop narrowly specific criteria for determining what political candidates they will support, or paint their area of influence with a broad brush.

The Progressive Women's Alliance (PWA) falls into the latter category, though that does not mean the committee's decision-making process lacks in specificity.

As constituted in tax law under the well-known section number 527, a "non-connected" PAC (that is, one that is not sponsored by a corporation or a labor union) must register with the Federal Election Commission and report its contributions and disbursements to the Internal Revenue Service. Numerous regulations apply, and a good guide to them can be found on the Web at <http://www.fec.gov/pdf/nongui.pdf>.

Offsetting the burden of such detailed compliance, the advantage of a PAC is the ability to give a lot more money to a candidate than an individual can.

Last Wednesday Kym Spring, a member of PWA's Candidate Endorsement Committee, told a crowd of about 40 people about how PWA determines which candidates to endorse and which to fund.

The Candidate Endorsement Committee is co-chaired by two very active community members, Mary Alice Williams and Lee Nelson Weber.

Spring herself, who may be familiar to Grand Rapids Legal News readers as the current director of the Kent County Foreclosure Response Team, has a broad and widely-varied background. She worked for the Democratic Coordinated Campaign which elected Clinton in 1992, for the U.S.

Department of Agriculture as Director of Women's Programs, and has done campaign training for Caribbean prime minister candidates.

PWA chooses those it will endorse based on an in-depth investigation of each candidate rather than on inflexible criteria.

Spring pointed to the national Emily's List PAC, which is also women-centric. Emily's List will support only candidates who are female, pro-"choice" and Democrats. In contrast, PWA's objective is to get progressive candidates who are sympathetic to women's issues elected, which may — and does — mean supporting men and Republicans, and there is certainly not a focus on pro-"choice" candidates if the committee feels they cannot win their elections.

Ability to win is one of three broad criteria the committee looks at during the endorsement process. First, the candidate must align with PWA values. These are listed on their web site, [www.progressivewomensalliance.org](http://www.progressivewomensalliance.org) and include balancing "the power of the private sector" as well as separation of church and state, empowering diversity and equal opportunity for all, and protecting the environment.

Second, "We look at the strengths of the campaign itself, what kind of campaign plan the candidate has." according to Spring. Often, local and state races are won by the amount of effort the candidate is willing to put out, such as knocking on doors, appearing in debates and meeting with the public, and getting the word out, but the committee also reviews how critical monetary funding is likely to be in each campaign.

Spring acknowledges that "winnability," the third criterion, is the toughest of all to assess, entailing collection of both hard and soft data. Because funds are not unlimited, PWA feels it would be irresponsible to back a progressive candidate, no matter how wonderful that individual may be, in a race where non-progressives always win.

Determining the candidate's likelihood of success often means reaching out to statewide partners and processing information from other PACs or politically-interested organizations.

PWA backs candidates across the state for Senate and House positions in the Michigan legislature and in Congress, as well as some running for statewide offices, such as Jocelyn Benson who is vying to be Secretary of State. The group also supports county-level and even, on occasion, more local candidates. This year the only county commission candidate PWA has endorsed is Candace Chivis, a newcomer on the political scene who has been a community activist, especially at the neighborhood level.

There is often an emphasis on races along the Lakeshore, in part because many PWA members live there. A few years ago, Lakeshore members decided to hold separate monthly programming meetings, but the endorsement process is done jointly. PWA supported Marcia Hovey-Wright, for state representative from the Muskegon area, in a hotly-contested primary which she won, meaning she is very likely to win in November since she is a Democrat in a Democratic district.

Another Lakeshore candidate, Mary Valentine, spoke at Wednesday's event and said that PWA's support has been invaluable in her past runs for state representative. (She is now campaigning for state senate.) The aforementioned Emily's List is actually based on the acronym "Early Money Is Like Yeast," and Valentine thanked PWA profusely for offering her such early money.

Two other candidates who have received PWA support before spoke at the event as well. Rebekah Warren from Ann Arbor has been a highly successful representative and now wants to

transition to the senate, and Representative Kate Segal from the Battle Creek area is seeking re-election.

Having a broad endorsement process is just one way in which PWA helps candidates. Spring pointed out that PWA members are broadly connected in the community and consider it their responsibility to spread the word about progressive candidates.

“We also differ from other PACs in that we provide that educational component of having monthly meetings,” explains Lois Tomaszewicz, a founding PWA member. During an election year, the programs for the monthly meetings consist of candidate and issue presentations.

On Sept. 15 an expert will speak on the situation with the Michigan Supreme Court.

One endorsed candidate who has been no stranger at PWA functions is Patrick Miles, who is seeking to fill the U.S. House of Representatives seat formerly held by Vern Ehlers. Miles is a former chair of the Grand Rapids Bar Association, and told the crowd, “I’ve been working hard on diversity and inclusion both as Grand Rapids Bar chair and the chair of the diversity committee for years.”

Miles also pointed out that this month marks the 90-year anniversary of women’s gaining the right to vote. Later in the meeting a PWA member dressed as a suffragette also commemorated the occasion with a toast.

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