

Two women face choices, persevere in municipal government jobs

Find tougher climbs than male counterparts

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In a 2013 Pew Research Center report of social and demographic trends, women reported a greater number of challenges than men when balancing career and family obligations.

According to data, 51% of mothers whose children under age 18 said being a working mother made it harder for them to advance in their career. Only 16% of men with children under age 18 reported that concern.

Today, although more women serve as municipal administrators, they continue to confront the same difficult choices. Two women in central Maine have faced those obstacles and persevered.

Christine Landes, Gardiner's city manager since 2018, started what she expected would be a long and satisfying career in the banking world. Beginning in 1998 as a teller, she soon became a branch manager. She loved her job, she said, but she and her husband wanted to start a family. Her management position required increasingly longer hours and lots of travel, so she applied for the town clerk position in Warren, where she lived. That's when she experienced an awakening, she said.

"I didn't really enjoy civics or government or history classes in school," she said. "But then I really fell in love with the process of municipal government and all the work behind the scenes."

After she earned her bachelor of science degree in public administration from University of Maine, she completed her master's degree, with a concentration in public administration from Southern New Hampshire University. Since then, she has worked for four municipalities, most recently as Bethel's town manager, before she was offered her current position as Gardiner's city manager.

"These 25 years have flown by, and I can say I am very happy with my career choice," she said.

Landes expanded her civic involvement, serving as vice president and president of the Maine Municipal Association Executive Committee, as a board member of Maine Town and City County Managers Association and as chair of the Maine Service Center Coalition.



Mary Sabins, Vassalboro's town manager, said she's encouraged to see the steady increase in the number of women choosing a career in municipal government. The "glass ceiling" of acceptance of women in municipal administration is still there, she said, but she said it's worth the extra work.

"If I don't have the answer someone needs, I make sure I can find someone who does," she said.

Mary Sabins, Vassalboro's town manager, also faced a similarly challenging career path in municipal government. Before taking her current job 12 years ago, she worked in the towns of Chelsea, Windsor, Union and Hope, as well as for Maine School Administrative District 40.

"There was definitely a glass ceiling 30 years ago for women in municipal government," she said. "But I have observed positive changes, and I certainly would encourage young women to think about a career in public administration."

Sabins said she and her husband, Scot, were high school sweethearts and had planned to start a family before she started

her professional career. In 1988, she was hired as a part-time office secretary for the Town of Union and then served as their town clerk. After nine years, she was passed over for the newly-developed town manager position.

"I came in second in a field of 80 applicants," she said. "The guy who got the job had a degree, and I didn't."

She decided she needed that "piece of paper," so she enrolled in the bachelor of science degree program in public administration at the University of Maine. While studying for her degree, she raised the couple's two children and took a job with lower pay and fewer hours in a neighboring town. She said she never regretted her choice to face the challenges of balancing family and career.



Christine Landes, Gardiner's city manager, encourages women to pursue a career in public service. She has faced challenges, she said, but doesn't regret the path she has taken.

Photos contributed:

"It has been the most pleasurable experience in my career to work as Vassalboro's town manager," she said.

She's continued to seek challenges in a traditionally male-dominated field. In 2014, with the full support of Vassalboro selectmen, she was selected as one of the 12 members of Maine Municipal Association's Executive Committee. Since then, she has served as the board's vice president and president and as a representative of MMA's Legislative Policy Committee. Sabins expressed appreciation to Governor Janet Mills for reestablishing the lines of communication with Maine Municipal Association. Former Governor Paul LePage wouldn't accept recommendations from the 72-member board, she said, and that shut the window to communication with the nearly 500 communities in the state.