

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 5, “Women in City Government”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith. A couple of days ago, on August 18th, 2020 [podcast theme music fades out], our nation celebrated the centennial of the 19th Amendment. Quick reminder, the 19th Amendment reads as follows: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States, or by any State, on account of sex.

The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. A couple of comments here: While we are celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the 19th Amendment, women's suffrage was fought for for decades before 1920, and it's important to note that the 19th Amendment did not give all women the right to vote. Citizenship, polling taxes, and literacy tests prevented many women from voting. But if you'll indulge me for just a moment here, I'd like to add in some Minnesota history.

The first time the Minnesota Legislature was petitioned for women's suffrage was in 1860. It failed to pass, the first of many petitions that would fail to pass, such as in 1866, 1867, 1868 ... you get the idea. But in January of 1919, representative Charles Warner, of the city of Aitkin, introduced a state constitutional suffrage bill. Sadly, this too failed, but 1919 was indeed the year, and on May 21st, the US House of Representatives passed the language that would become the 19th Amendment, leading to many states passing women's suffrage petitions. The timing was finally right, and Minnesota's Governor Burnquist called a special session for the suffrage amendment on September 8th, 1919, where it passed both the House and Senate in one day.

Needing 36 states to ratify the amendment, the 19th Amendment was signed into law in the US Constitution in August of 1920. And one of the very first places that women in the United States cast their ballot was in South St. Paul, where women turned out to vote on a city bond referendum. A year later, in 1921, Lillian Cox Gault was elected as mayor of St. Peter. She is thought to be the first woman mayor in the state.

So, in thinking about this momentous event in history, it got us here at the League of Minnesota Cities asking ourselves about the role of women in city government. Maybe not the role, per se, but the opportunities and challenges and impact of women leaders in city government today, in 2020, 100 years after women were first able to vote. So, in this episode, you are going to hear from three different leaders: One elected official, mayor Maria Regan Gonzalez of Richfield, one city administrator, Anna Gruber, of Sartell, and one assistant city manager, Mike Sable, of Maplewood.

We're going to start out today with Mike. One of the important pieces of the conversation about the 19th Amendment is the role of men in supporting and advancing women. You heard me mention Representative Charles Warner, who introduced the state constitutional suffrage bill that failed in January of 1919, and there were others — Representatives Anson Hayden, John Seboski, Alpheus Colton, and John Lathrop, to name just a few — who petitioned for women's suffrage at the Legislature in the 1860s. When you read the tactics of the famous suffragettes — Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Hunt Harrison — they talk about coalition-building and public awareness amongst women and relentless

lobbying of politicians, the men who had power to give women's suffrage voice in the Legislature, the men who were allies to the suffragettes.

[Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So Mike, you and I met at an event that Maplewood hosted as part of the MCMA Women in the Profession Committee, where the conversation was about male allies. First, I'd like to point out that that group had a number of male allies, who show up and sit on the committee, but I'd like to hear from you about why you participated in the session on male allies and what motivated you to show up.

Mike Sable:

I had been a participant in the West Metro Coffee and Careers that GERALYN BARONE, the city manager of Minnetonka, had hosted, and I was invited to participate, I did just that. So, I got to experience it first-hand, and when I took this job in the east metro, I knew that I wanted to play a role in fostering that work, and so I kind of took that model.

The City of Maplewood does employee engagement surveys annually, and one of the themes that emerged, uh, was that women in our workplace didn't feel that there were many opportunities to engage either other women in the profession, or they didn't see a career ladder for themselves. And so the city of Maplewood, under the leadership of Melinda Coleman, really said, "You know what? We need to be more deliberate, more outspoken, and and more direct in our outreach to not only the women in our workplace, but the women in the profession." And so, we offered to be a permanent host for this group, and really, it, it's an important part of who we are, and if you're going to make a change, you actually have to do the work.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Tell me a little bit about what you see as opportunities for men who want to be allies or supporters of women in city government.

Mike Sable:

You know, I think it's really an opportunity to, sort of, show up and be a listener, and come with humility. I think society has always encouraged people to be, sort of, take charge and lead and, you know, that gets rewarded. And what we forget often is that creating space for people to be successful and to bring their whole selves to work is really an important opportunity for men to be allies, is to set aside and designate a space for everybody to be welcomed and included and not assume that people want to be led, but actually create that space for people to, to really step into roles and grow into roles.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about how you create space for people to grow into leadership in their own kind of authentic way.

Mike Sable:

So in many organizations, people at the front line, uh, particularly entry-level positions, don't get opportunities to interact with, uh, senior leaders, and so deliberately creating space for that to occur in positions that are historically female dominated in the field, getting them an introduction to other parts of the organization so they can expend their perspective and understand the scope of what the city does, that's a role that leaders can really play. What I forget is that somebody actually gave me the opportunity to see that, and so I have a, sort of a duty and an obligation, in having a position of privilege, to create that for others.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I like that. Is, does the City of Maplewood have a formalized structure for how you do that, either through sort of mentoring or coaching? Or more of an informal method?

Mike Sable:

We have what we call our leadership academy. Uh, every year, we take 12 staff and, um, put them through an immersive city government 101, but also really understanding kind of how senior management thinks, and so we do a formal 12-month program, and they really get exposure to what all of the city's, what all of the city functions are.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So you mentioned a number of men who stood on the Coffee and Careers and the Women in the Profession Committee. How do we get more male allies?

Mike Sable:

I think you get more male allies by inviting more men to participate. If you have a group that's designated for just women, I think men have an opportunity to learn so much. I read, there's a new book that's called Humility is the New Smart, and this is that sort of mindset shift, that I'm not going to have all of the answers, but if I can convene enough really smart and talented people, I'm going to grow and I'm going to learn. And really, I think, is a fundamental shift in sort of what's necessary to build more male allies is to walk into a room and say, "I don't have the answers, but I'm willing to sit with you until we can figure it out, and I'm going to be curious, and I'm going to learn."

And I think, as, particularly men experience that, and they, you know, come out of an uncomfortable situation a little bit smarter, a little bit stronger, a little bit better, it becomes easier to do it the second, the third time and and then encourage other people to do it.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, 100 years ago, the 19th Amendment was ratified. Women got the vote, they began running for office, and later, women joined the professional workforce, including government positions. However, there's work to be done to both attract and retain women into local government. What are one or two things that we, as a sector, should be doing more of, in order to attract more gender diversity into the workforce?

Mike Sable:

So, at a really base level, make sure that your candidate pool reflects the communities that you serve. And so, it really is thinking about re-evaluating the words and the language we use in our, in our job descriptions. Telling the story, a little bit, about how local government actually transforms lives. I used to work with the library system, and, you know, one of the things that we always talked about is, uh, somewhere, someplace, in one of our libraries, a child is going to learn how to read, and we will have transformed their life forever. And so, being a little bit ...loftier in the story that we tell about the power that government can play in the role of people's lives, I think, could be, to go a long way and encourage people to apply for jobs.

The other one is to think about the personnel policies that we have. Uh, I worked for the City of Brooklyn Park and we were the first city to offer a paid parental leave program. And it was driven largely by, uh, young women in our environment and our organization who said, "Listen, you've got to be more family friendly. You've got to create ways that we can be successful at home and at work."

If you look at the math, women are, are going to college at higher rates than men. Um, so if you're looking for knowledge workers going forward, odds are going to be very good that it's going to be women in the

workplace who are going to be driving it. Just from a, from a pure statistical standpoint, it's really important that we have, uh, more women in the workplace.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Lastly, I'm going to ask you a question that I'm asking all of our guests today, which is: What motivated you to pursue a city government career?

Mike Sable:

Uh, I think I've always been wired to, to think about community and to be active in the community. Uh, there's always been a sort of spirit of public service, uh, in my upbringing. But for me, I think it's the, it's the notion that the things that we do last for generations. I've had the opportunity to, to work on some construction projects that I know that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to take a part of.

And so, for me, working in local government means you get to do sort of lasting things that, um, make everybody better, that makes our communities better and stronger and they thrive. Getting an opportunity to work where people love what they do, they love where they live, they want to make things right for the community, and you can help facilitate that and make that happen — that's really rewarding.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Next, we are chatting with Anna Gruber, who was recently appointed as the city administrator in Sartell. And we're going to start out with the same question we posed to Mike: The motivation for a career in city government.

Anna Gruber:

Yeah, thanks for having me guys, I appreciate it.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah. So Anna, what motivated you to pursue a career in city government?

Anna Gruber:

I worked at a non-profit community center in high school, all through my high school years both volunteer and employed. So I knew from that that I had a passion in serving communities, I wanted to work in the non-profit space. I went to college at St. Cloud State University, and the major there was a public administration major in order to be able to work in non-profits. So that's what I declared my major as, and as a part of that, um, I realized that public administration is not just non-profits, it's local government as well, and that my passion was, uh, for serving communities was even bigger than non-profits, and I ended up in local government from there. So, all the way back to my high school years is where that passion started.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's so cool, and it's also a good reminder that city government, local government — we need to do better about reaching out to high school students ...

Anna Gruber:

Yes!

Adriana Temali-Smith:

... to remind them that it's a great career pathway. When you're thinking about what you want to do, when you want to go change communities, be change makers at a local level, don't just think of non-profits, think about local government.

Anna Gruber:

Absolutely. It's, yeah, it started for me in my teenage years, and, and they hooked me.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's awesome. So, what's your experience been like working in city government?

Anna Gruber:

Yeah, overall, it has been a great experience. I mean, I'm still in it, so that's promising. [Laughter]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yep.

Anna Gruber:

I had the opportunity to work in several different communities, both as an administrator and then also more as a, like, liaison/consultant-type role, and you know, hopefully impacting them all positively. And, I've enjoyed being able to give back, uh, in multiple different communities. It's also given me the opportunity to give back to the next generation of leaders by mentoring several of them.

So, we have St. Cloud State right in town; um, I've been able to pair up with multiple students there who also happen to be women and also happen to be women employed in local government today. So, it's just all around, fun, full circle opportunity for me to be able to serve.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's really cool. I'm wondering if you could expand a little bit on what drew you to want to do that mentorship and maybe, a little bit about what's, what's your experience been like of being a woman in your role in city government?

Anna Gruber:

Coming through the ranks of wanting to be in local government, you obviously look out and see that it's heavily populated with men. So, you know you're walking into a field that you're going to be the minority in. Um, and I knew I wanted to give back to those women who were going to be coming through that same experience that I was. It allowed me an opportunity to just give back in the way that I wanted somebody to provide mentorship to me.

Also, it's just neat to be able to come alongside women, and help empower them to succeed in local government. In my career and my experience in local government, it's shown me that we're powerful. I mean, it's ... I don't really think about being female in my role. I expect the same respect that my character shows, um, and I think people treat me accordingly. So I haven't let it get in the way of anything, and that's been, probably, my biggest message to any of the women coming through that are younger: that as long as your character and, and you demand the respect, and you earn it, um, you aren't going to have any issues. And I, I just try to lead by example, and the fact that I'm female just adds a whole other layer of superpower to me. [Laughter]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I love that. Superpower, definitely. So Anna, you have had your career in Greater Minnesota, and I'm wondering if you chose the place or if the place chose you?

Anna Gruber:

Yeah. That's a great question. In high school, growing up, I was like, "Oh I'm going to go to the Twin Cities. That's where I'm going to end up. That's where I'll go to college." I ended up going to college in... At St. Cloud State in St. Cloud. Um, even in college, I thought I'm going to ... I'll head to the metro, I'll be in a

bigger city. Um, but I never left, um, and I'm still in Greater Minnesota and I'll never leave Greater Minnesota, I, I love it out here. But I, I do think the, the place chose me. I think, you know, everything happens for a reason. Pierz was just an awesome opportunity for me.

I was 22 years old when I took that job as city administrator. And I, I mean, that's, that's pretty awesome, that I was given that opportunity by a primarily male council, um, and a very traditional Greater Minnesota community that hadn't necessarily seen female leadership. I stayed in Region 5, which is, is the region that Pierz was in, and, and focused in Greater Minnesota. And now in Sartell, which is where I always lived, uh, through all of those careers. I, I've always resided in Sartell. So, it kind of brought me back home, but still Greater Minnesota, and every single spot and stop along the way, I think, has chosen me.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, we're marking the centennial of the 19th Amendment. What are your thoughts on this?

Anna Gruber:

I mean, obviously, gratefulness. I think that's the first thing that any female would think about the 19th Amendment and celebrating the centennial and in awe of the change that they were able to bring. But, you know, honestly, more than anything, it kind of leaves me speechless, that there was a time when, as a female, I would have not been allowed the same right as a male. So ... of course, I know and recognize that we still have work to do, and we're continuing to fight this battle, but it's just incredible to me to think about how far we've come.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, you've already alluded to this a little bit, but I'm wondering if you've thought any more about some of the opportunities that we have, as we move forward, to continue to advance gender equity in local government.

Anna Gruber:

I think you can see, especially in Greater Minnesota, the, the gap in having women in leadership roles, both elected official roles, and then also in hired roles. But, it's also a catch-22, because women have to be at the table, and run for office, and apply for the positions, and be interested in it. So it, it's a twofold. Like, we have to try to start at the high school level and and empower women to know that this is a career that they can succeed in. We need to ensure that there's fairness in equality, both hiring practices and in, in campaign races, and that when females are qualified and willing to run for office, or willing to apply for a job, or take on leadership roles, that they're not going to experience any level of harassment, or different treatment, or double standards in what their expectations are. So I, I think some of those areas, we have work to do, but it's, it's also encouraging women to be in the field, too.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

In doing research for this episode, I learned about a term from the suffragette era that I wasn't familiar with, which is municipal housekeeping. Municipal housekeeping argued that the welfare of a city directly influenced the welfare of a household, and the private sphere that women had domain over. Therefore, women at this time argued that, in order to preserve the health and welfare of their own families, women implored that they must maintain the health and welfare of the wider public.

They took up activism on city issues such as sanitation, food safety, and poverty. I loved this example and thinking back to a time that is so unfamiliar to me, and I'm wondering, in a modern era, how this plays out. So I'm wondering: How have you seen women in your own community step forward to get involved with modern day city issues?

Anna Gruber:

This is a really good question. In Sartell, for example, we're, we're a really young community. We have a really strong school district. So, we have a lot of children in town, a lot of young families. And, I, it's the mama bears. I mean, you, those mama bears are activists, and they are front and center. And especially when you have children involved, that just gives them an even louder voice that I think that they feel like, this municipal housekeeping is important and they are extremely involved. Anything that can improve the quality of life for their family, and their children, and that next generation that they're raising — I think women take a lot of ownership in that.

Um, it's been really interesting, especially, to see some of this come out with, uh, the George Floyd, social injustice, equity conversations. I've seen a lot of young women at the table in our community, who are especially passionate about this. And I think it's, it is this municipal housekeeping concept, that, "Hey, we're, we're not just a woman in the work force. We're mothers. We want to raise our children in an equitable, uh, just, fair, environment, and, and that involves our community." And so, modern day, you're seeing that play out. It might not be voting rights, but, but it's equally important.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

We're going to move now to our third and final guest of the show. Maria Regan Gonzalez is the mayor of Richfield, and is the first Latina mayor in the state of Minnesota. So could you tell us a little bit about yourself and what motivated you to run for city council back in 2016?

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

I grew up in a family where our parents really taught us the importance of community service, and I grew up with cousins in Mexico, and my family's from Neza, which is one of the worst and most dangerous neighborhoods in Mexico City. And then also, growing up here in the Midwest and living a middle class life, there was just such a stark difference. And our parents taught us from a very young age that, you know, just because I'm born in this country, we have so many privileges that our own family doesn't have. And that it's a responsibility and duty of ours to use that privilege, and our education, and all the resources and opportunities we have to, to build a better community, to serve our family, to serve our, our neighbors, and that that was a non-negotiable.

And, and so I just grew up with that core belief in of civic engagement and service. And then also, as a young professional, seeing so many inequities, whether it was kind of more subliminal silent inequities that undocumented community members faced, to very blatant inequities like the killing of Jamar Clark and Michael Brown that had happened around, a few years before I ran for office. I just made the decision that I could no longer do what I was doing, that I really had to take on a much deeper commitment to community service and advancing equity, and that I was going to do that by running in my city for local office.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

You talked about a lot of things in there, including representation, um, the idea that, you know, there's a level of comfort or perhaps discomfort that comes with more women and more women of color getting into elected office. You talked about some of the barriers. I'm wondering: What are some of the opportunities that you see women having in front of them as they decide to run for city council in our modern day, in 2020, where we do have more women and more women of color, as you mentioned, running for elected office?

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

So, I think women can be very collaborative. We are the jack of all trades. We might be the matriarch. We, um, might have to just balance so many things and we have so many skillsets. We are able to navigate

tension and difficulty and understand different perspectives. And we understand the struggle of having to navigate barriers and how to do so successfully, and how to thrive, and kind of how to bring different people and different perspectives to the table.

And so, I just think that women, and, obviously, communities of color and other disenfranchised communities, have so much to offer. We are just busting the status quo across the whole country, and we've continued to be told, "You're not good enough. You're not ready. Wait in line." And what we are clearly seeing in this country is that that is not true. Our time for leading is now. Our time, um, to run for office is now. Our time to change the face of leadership is now. Regardless of what those messages are around us, there's a huge movement of women and young women of color that are proving that to not be true.

Given the inequities that we're seeing with COVID, given the structural racism that's pervasive in our country, and, and, and the racial inequities, we need leadership that can really address these super-challenging problems. And I think women, people of color, and folks who come from other communities that are not represented in leadership, are the right people for that kind of work.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

You know, we talked about the idea of, of identity really shaping some of the ways that we can contribute and the ways that we approach complex problems. How does your identity as both a woman and as a Latina impact the way you approach your role as mayor?

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

I think my identity is the foundation of, of my role as mayor, and informing my leadership style in an executive position. There's a lot less women, and a lot less young women, and a lot less young women of color in these positions. And as a young woman of color mayor, I, I just have so much opportunity to say, "This is what it looks like for me to lead authentically, and not sacrifice who I am and not sacrifice my identity." And actually, my identity is an asset in this role and is an asset in this community.

So, I'm always thinking about, how can I be really true to, to who I am? I like to support people's leadership versus saying, "I'm the leader and I need to be followed." But I actually really like to support people finding that inspiration and leadership within themselves. I also think me being authentic and extremely comfortable in my identity as a millennial, as a Latina, as a woman, helps other people say, "If she can do it, you know, I can do it, too, and I don't have to sacrifice who I am."

And so, I, I really do take to heart what it means to show my leadership, and and to express that by lifting up my identity, and all my identities. I was voted into office for my leadership, and that's what I need to bring to my community.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah, and I think it's worth noting here that your community has certainly rallied around you. You won your seat with 96% of the vote in Richfield, and that is pretty amazing. So, I think that your, your lessons, — and particularly for, I think, anybody who is a younger person, no matter what their background — um, that idea of staying rooted in who you are and, and being authentic to that is something that all leaders should learn from. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about whether you think that female elected officials are treated any differently, and if so, how?

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

Female elected officials are absolutely treated differently than their counterparts. That is true for women of color. That's true for younger women. That's true from people who are not older, white, CIS-gendered males, period. It can be a range of, of treatment, from having your, your contributions disregarded, cut

down, having to defend your position. Um, having questions asked to you that your peers would never have asked to you. For example: Do you only represent Latino people? No, I don't only represent Latino people. I represent our whole city, and have you ever asked that question to somebody else?

Being a woman, I also am asked a lot about my marital status and if I have children or not, and kind of my family life that I don't know my male counterparts ... I doubt that they're asked about those things. I think, sometimes, people feel uncomfortable if I speak Spanish or if I'm doing work with the Latino community, as if I'm focusing on them at the cost of leaving others out or not serving everybody, when it's actually a huge asset. Especially in a community like Richfield, where almost half of our students are Latino students. Where we have a strong, diverse community in our city, having a mayor like me that can open up doors and build trust in communities where others can't is a huge asset.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

There's a lot of male elected officials out there who are wondering how they can be better allies to women in office. What advice do you have for them?

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

I would say, the first thing folks can do is to listen to women, to listen to community members of color, to listen to people who are different than you, and really listen. Um, not just listen to respond, or react, or defend, but listen to understand and listen to build authentic, real relationships. And, I think, working with your peers to lift up the voices, the voices that are not traditionally heard — whether it's women or other communities — and to reinforce those messages. In the space that you take up and the privilege that you might have, think about how you can open that space up for others to come to the table and support them in lifting up their own wisdom, reinforce those points.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mayor Maria, it's been really wonderful chatting to you today. I'm wondering if we could close out with me asking you: What woman inspires you, and why?

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

In leadership work or any work that's, that's focused on policy change, systems change, and large scale, you need to be light-hearted. You need to think outside of your sphere, um, and you just need to connect to creativity, levity, joy, and keep getting that inspiration. And I seriously do look to Beyoncé for that inspiration [laughter]. She's such a movement builder. She's authentic. She's rooted in who she is. She's very powerful, and, and she's strong and genuine in, in how she presents herself and her work. She always connects her work back to history, back to systems, um, and she lifts up things like historical and systemic oppression in her work. And she also lifts up things like amazing women of color, and youth doing exceptional work. And, she can be strong, and fierce, and grounded, and authentic at the same time. And I just really find a lot of inspiration, commitment, or encouragement, in the work that she does.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That answer put the biggest smile on my face. So I completely understand why you chose her. [Laughter]

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

Yeah. For sure.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Well, I want to thank you so much for being on the show today.

Maria Regan Gonzalez:

Thank you so much for the opportunity. I appreciate it.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Here at City Speak, we like to wrap up [podcast theme music fades out] by reflecting on the important lessons our guests bring us. There were three key things that I heard from probably all of our guests that we heard from today. The first one is that, as with many other things, listening deeply and for understanding is really important. And that's both, listening to be a better leader, no matter who you are, and listening to be an ally and lift up those around you — whether they are women or, uh, people of color, or other marginalized groups — listening for understanding is a really key component.

The second one is that, while women have made huge strides in the 100 years since the 19th Amendment, we still have a long way to go. We don't have really solid data on women in elected office, or women in city leadership across the state of Minnesota. We do know that nationally, only about 13% of city administrators are women, and we know that that is not representative or reflective of our population on the whole.

The third thing that I heard is that pipelining is really important. So as much as we can provide role models and mentor younger people — especially younger women — and encourage them to consider careers in city government and encourage them to think about elected office, that's one of the best ways that we can start to build the next generation of women leaders.

[Podcast theme music begins]

That's it for our show today. I want to thank you for listening to City Speak, and I have a few thank yous. To our three guests, thank you for your wisdom and for sharing your experience and thoughts with us. And to the Minnesota Historical Society, thank you for all that you do, and for helping us out when we reached out to you. And lastly, I want to give a special thank you to Laurel Poole, who was our intern this summer and worked especially hard on this episode, and all of the episodes that we've released lately on The City Speak.

Episodes are released regularly and are posted on the League's website and via Twitter. You can find us on iTunes, Google Play Music, and other podcast applications. If you have an idea for an episode, feedback, or just want to get in touch, you can connect with us at podcast@lmc.org. Until next time, take care.

[Podcast theme music ends]