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## Ask Them

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Wisconsin has not only a workforce shortage, but in many cases a candidate shortage. According to the 2016 State of Wisconsin Cities and Villages Report sponsored by the League, most local government positions have one *or fewer* candidates on the ballot next spring. In small communities, the level of competition is even lower.

How do we encourage people to run for office? How do we fill the committees, councils and boards that perform critical policy-making work? How do we get people to connect with their government? It's a timely topic. December is the month citizens take out nomination papers for local offices. The deadline for turning them in is January 3, 2017.

We know that about twenty-percent of all local offices will turn over next April. We also know that it is becoming more difficult to convince residents to stand for election and serve. The 2016 State of Wisconsin Cities and Village Report found that over half of cities and villages will not have a contested race on the ballot next year. In some places there will be blank spots on ballots.

Disengagement of citizens from their government is not new; it has been developing for years. This fall's gutter-level discourse at the national level does not help. If national politics is that ugly, who can blame citizens for avoiding elections at the city level?

But a democracy cannot function without involved citizens. Ours is a government "of the people and by the people..." literally. I was shocked when Wauwatosa Mayor Kathy Ehley told me she has 250 spots on citizen committees that must be filled for her city to function properly. Even Bayfield, population 481, relies on 75-100 volunteers. There is no ruling class in American government; we're it. In all communities, but especially the smaller cities and villages that define most of Wisconsin, it takes a village to run a village.

So what's the answer? Here's one: Ask them.

Some parts of this problem are beyond our control. We cannot halt demographics, and we can't reshape the national dialog. But we are not powerless. In fact, you have the most important tool within your grasp. You know your community; you know the people who live there. Ask them to serve. Talk about different ways they can serve. If they say no, ask someone else.

Nearly everyone who has run for local office did so at least in part because they were asked. As a professional working in the nonprofit world, I have attended a number of training sessions on recruitment and fundraising. Over and over again we are told the number one reason people don't step up and help is because no one asks. Don't overlook the simple. Ask.

Many city and village leaders will look at me in dismay and say, "We *have* asked. We've asked everyone we know and several we don't know." Your neighbors avoid you and nobody sits with you at the Chamber lunch any more. All I can say is expand your horizons. Start attending other service clubs and include civic service as part of your monthly Senior Center talk. Pester board members for names. Get the local paper to write about it.

It's a never-ending task, but it's a necessary one. Democracy depends on it. Ask.