How a GC Became Mayor: Jill Hoffman’s 6 Reasons to Say “Yes!” to Local Government

Career Development

Jill Hoffman, the co-founder, former general counsel, and CEO of Qorkz Wine, believes that more women should take the leap into local government. “There are always many good reasons to not to participate in politics,” she says. “We need women to say ‘yes,’ participate, and lead. We add a lot to the table.”

Hoffman, who is now a leader in her local community, once asked herself, “Do I have a responsibility to contribute? And do I have something positive to contribute?” With a resounding “yes,” Hoffman decided to run for Sausalito City Council.

And taking the leap has been well worth it. Hoffman was elected to the Sausalito City Council in 2014, receiving the greatest number of votes among three candidates for two seats. She was selected to serve as vice mayor in 2015, and then as mayor of Sausalito for 2016. Through Hoffman’s journey, she learned several good reasons to get involved in local government.

Get involved to change your community

“I was not involved in local politics before 2014 at all,” says Hoffman. However, she has always had strong ties to her community. She explains, “We’ve lived in Sausalito since 1999. We moved here when I was pregnant to raise our son. We fell in love with the community and still live here.” These community ties eventually led to Hoffman’s foray into politics. Over a decade after moving to Sausalito, Hoffman found herself in the midst of local politics.

The city wanted to rezone a small commercial district adjacent to her residential neighborhood to allow for high density development, which would have allowed concessions to the developer for view obstruction, parking allotment, and setback. This would have meant a developer could have built in a way that obstructed water views, added more cars to an already challenged parking situation, and no setback of the buildings from the sidewalks. This type of development would have been out of character for her historic neighborhood made up of approximately 100 moderate sized single-family homes.

Hoffman and her neighbors decided they had to act to preserve the character of their neighborhood. “We found ourselves disagreeing with the city of Sausalito,” she explains. “Since I was a litigation attorney and have a background in advocacy, I was the most obvious person in the group to advocate for our point of view.” Hoffman attended many city council meetings over the next three months, where she discovered other concerning issues. Eventually, a few people approached her to seek election. Hoffman truly prioritized the community and her support seemed wide and deep, so she decided to run. “We started with a core group of supporters, foremost was my husband and son, and built the campaign from there.”

Like a seasoned politician, Hoffman recruited a great campaign manager — a fellow female attorney Sarah Hook Brooks, who had recently passed the bar exam — to manage outreach. Their approach was varied, but effective. “We tried to knock on every active voter’s door. We decided whom to approach and set aside the weekends to campaign. We talked to many people and used social media,” explains Hoffman.

A creative approach helped Hoffman’s team reach out to the unique Sausalito community. “We tried all kinds of things,” she says. “For example, we found that Saturday morning coffees with Sausalito citizens were very effective. Walking and knocking was also effective.” The experience was very different for Hoffman, but she enjoyed the process. “It was fun and exhilarating and I found myself

doing things that I have never done before," she explains.

Hoffman came in first among the three candidates, taking the top spot by a five percent margin. "It was very gratifying to be elected. People were ready for change and for course correction," Hoffman explains. "When I took office, we set a very aggressive agenda for evaluating how the city was being managed." After going from citizen to mayor in two years, Hoffman is convinced that anyone is capable of getting involved with politics and changing their community for the better.

Run for office to deal with difficult issues

"I didn't come from a special interest perspective — I came from a resident's perspective. I care about our community and our little historic town," Hoffman declares with pride. "I felt strongly that some of the decisions that were made were not best for Sausalito's residents. And I wanted to do something about it."

Hoffman decided to tackle better management the city's pension fund debt for Sausalito government workers, which is an issue all over California. "It is a huge liability and burden for our town. As the pension fund managed by the state agency failed to perform as projected, the city has had to pay the difference, which is now at approximately US$22 million, and growing annually," Hoffman explains. "I felt that Sausalito wasn't doing a good enough job to reduce this liability and I saw that it was coming out of our general budget." This meant that there was less money for roads, parks, and infrastructure.

Although this is a difficult, ongoing issue, Hoffman was determined to tackle it. She explains, "I was looking for more aggressive, creative ways to pay off and reduce liability. We have taken some measures, but I would like to be more proactive in reducing the debt which is better for our community."

In fact, Hoffman hopes to do even more about this issue in the future. "We can be in a better place in the long run," she says. "I am excited to take another stab at it." Hoffman's efforts show that getting involved in politics is an opportunity to tackle the difficult issues head-on.

Run for office to be an innovative leader

Tourist management in Sausalito is a real challenge. People love visiting the charming, historic little town right outside of San Francisco, close to the Golden Gate Bridge. "It has become increasingly clear that we need to balance the demands of tourism with the lifestyle of our residents," Hoffman explains.

This became apparent as Sausalito saw an increase in visitors riding rental bikes from San Francisco. "Depending on the weather, from March through October, about 900 to 1,200 bikes descend on Sausalito from San Francisco daily," says Hoffman. "It is a big burden for our small, historic, one-lane downtown district. Moreover, these riders are often inexperienced bikers, who are not familiar with our terrain. They are most definitely not as experienced as bicycle commuters or local recreational bikers."

Hoffman was determined to find an innovative solution that would benefit both tourists and residents. Hoffman was instrumental in supporting a pro-active bicycle management plan, and Sausalito Plus, a nonprofit that manages this problem. In the process, she helped create about 30 seasonal jobs for teenagers and active seniors, who manage the bike flow. "The Sausalito Plus employees are trained

in safety and first aid. They route people to designated paid parking," she explains.

"We have been very innovative. We have a designated paid parking area where bikes can be parked in the downtown historic district. I know we are the first city in California, maybe even the United States, that charges for rental bike parking (locals park for free)," declares Hoffman. "I am very proud of that program. We created jobs with very little cost to the residents of Sausalito and we made substantial inroads to alleviating the underlying problem." Hoffman's work with Sausalito Plus is a great example of how politics can be used as a platform for innovation.

Run for office to learn new things

Hoffman also found herself managing issues that she never anticipated. For example, Richardson's Bay, the body of water between Sausalito and nearby Belvedere, has not been well managed for many years. People who anchor there don't have the legal authority to do so. In fact, many boats anchored in Richardson's Bay are either not seaworthy, abandoned, or have just been dumped in the Bay. This has become a big burden for Sausalito.

"It was a lot of learning because I never dealt with these issues before," Hoffman explains. She learned that part of her responsibility as a leader was to learn about unfamiliar issues, not just focus on those she understood. "Once you take on these responsibilities, you need to do your best to understand them so you can make the best decisions that benefit the residents," she says. "It is a lot of work! But this work is important. I would not have run if it weren't important. I want to do the best job I can for Sausalito's residents." Hoffman sees politics as an exciting opportunity to learn new things, but it isn't to be taken lightly. "It is a heavy responsibility. And you have to take that responsibility seriously," she warns.

Run to live unique international experiences

For such a small town, Sausalito has a uniquely high profile and recognizable name. In fact, it has three sister cities in Japan, Portugal, and Chile. Sausalito is very active in keeping these relationships vibrant. According to Hoffman, "These relationships are enriching for the citizens of all cities and are important contributors to lasting peace."

As part of the sister city relationship, the consulate-general of Japan asked Hoffman to make a toast during the celebration of the Emperor's birthday last December. Coincidentally, Hoffman was also asked to comment about the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the WWII Marinship Shipyard at an event in Sausalito the very next day. The shipyard was constructed in 1942 and contributed significantly to the country's World War II efforts. 2017 is the 75th anniversary of the shipyard with corresponding celebrations in Sausalito.

"I thought a lot about these opportunities to speak and the relationships they represented. I realized that it was a great honor to speak at both of the events," Hoffman explains. "75 years ago, we had a huge conflict that began with a bombing attack on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941, and ended with a horrific bombing of mainland Japan in August 1945. And now, 75 years later these bitter enemies have forged a lasting peace and friendship."

Hoffman concludes, "One of the lessons is that lasting peace is possible through the efforts of two countries and its citizens. It is people who are instrumental in creating peace. It is small communities and relationships that ultimately help us humanize others and transcend conflict." Without getting

involved in politics, Hoffman would never have lived this unique international insight. “For a moment, I saw how local politics fit into the grand scheme of things. And I loved what I saw,” she says.

Run to connect the dots and modernize

“I was the youngest person on city council when I was elected. With my focus on tech and entrepreneurship, I have been focused on whether we are conducting our business in the best way possible,” says Hoffman. Hoffman is focused on bringing more modern business sense to the historic town of Sausalito. “I want to see more connection, higher quality, and lower overhead. I most certainly want to do more with less, yet be forward thinking and responsive to the needs of the residents,” Hoffman declares. She has implemented modern techniques during her leadership. “We explored utilizing social media and technology to reach these efficacies. I love this ‘what if’ thinking for Sausalito,” she explains.

So far, Hoffman’s efforts to modernize have been met well. She explains, “Because of our location, we are blessed with great talent and technology readily available to us. My goal is to tap into these resources to help Sausalito become well organized and well run. I want to make Sausalito a model small city for everyone to emulate.”

Just like in-house counsel are always trying to come up with new and creative ways to address internal company challenges, Hoffman is always thinking of new ways to connect the dots in her community. For example, she explains, “We can do better on sustainability and natural resources. I also want to see more people in town have access to tech and WiFi as a way to become engaged and access government services and information.” Through her political leadership, Hoffman has unique opportunities to bring a new age of modernity to her beloved city, yet maintain the unique sense of the historic artist community.

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