

Carol Cain: Leadership program helps produce civic leaders

By Carol Cain Filed Under Commentary and criticism Carol Cain Michigan State University Livonia Grand Rapids

Feb. 15

freep.com



Former Gov. John Engler, from left, Anne Mervenne, Steve Tobocman and former Gov. James Blanchard at the 2010 Michigan Political Leadership Program fund-raiser at Laurel Manor in Livonia. It marked the first time Blanchard and Engler appeared together since the 2000 gubernatorial election. Mervenne and Tobocman are codirectors of the MPLP. / Leavenworth Photography

The Michigan Political Leadership Program started in 1992 with a mission of helping people learn more about civics with an eye towards getting involved.

More than two decades later, the MPLP — housed at Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research — has become a springboard for political careers almost immediately.

“The transition time from participating in the program to running for office is

getting shorter and shorter,” said Steve Tobocman, codirector of the MPLP, who is also managing partner at New Solutions Group.

“We have three people in our upcoming graduating class who are running for state rep,” Tobocman added.

There are 17 MPLP alums also running for state House, six for state Senate seats and one for Congress.

The program's track record is impressive as 92 MPLP alums have been elected to city, village and township offices; 52 elected to county offices; five to a college or university board; 39 are on local school boards and 28 elected or appointed to state offices.

Rebecca Thompson of Detroit, senior director of engagement at the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, is part of the upcoming graduating class now running as a Democrat in Michigan's 1st House District.

“I actually decided to run for office on my way home from a MPLP session,” said Thompson of her foray into politics. “We learned that there is never a perfect time to run. MPLP gave me the confidence to decide to go for it.”

“It's simply invaluable as you make friends from across the aisle who are working in policy and public office,” Thompson said. “It's not only meeting the other fellows, it's the codirectors and the alums. It's sort of a seal of approval with people when you mention you are a MPLP alum. It opens doors.”

The MPLP takes place one weekend each month for 10 months and covers topics like campaign finance, media relations and practical politics too, like knocking on doors. They conduct sessions in all quadrants of the state so fellows can network.

“The Michigan Political Leadership Program is known as one of the nation’s premier training grounds for up-and-coming leaders,” said Anne Mervenne, codirector of the MPLP. She’s also CEO of Mervenne & Company, a governmental relations consulting firm.

The program selects 24 fellows from a pool of applicants each year.

The 2013 class will graduate on March 7 at the MPLP’s annual fund-raising dinner at Laurel Manor in Livonia. Former Govs. Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota and Bill Richardson of New Mexico will speak on a panel that I will moderate.

MPLP administrators and the graduating class will also travel to Grand Rapids on March 8, where 400 people will hear from the two speakers at a breakfast.

Bryan Barnhill, who served as campaign manager for Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, is among the program’s alums.

“MPLP is a finishing school for aspiring political leaders in the state of Michigan,” Barnhill said.

“The opportunity to travel across the state and dive deep into pressing policy issues is one of a kind. The MPLP classroom lectures and seminars were a treat for a policy nerd like me,” he added.

The MPLP has a \$1,000 administration fee though MPLP offers scholarships that can offset some costs.

For more on applications, or information about the MPLP dinner or breakfast: call 517-353-0891 or <http://ippsr.msu.edu/mplp/events.html>

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