

## Green Light From Voters

History Written In Windham With Election Of Third-Party Candidate



**JEAN DE SMET, above, was elected first selectwoman in Windham Tuesday, the first Green Party candidate to win a top municipal post in state history. (MARK MIRKO / November 7, 2007)**

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WINDHAM, Conn. – As she knocked on doors throughout town over the past few months, Jean de Smet had an inkling she was going to make history on Election Day.

De Smet, a Green Party candidate for first selectman, was met, she says, by unexpected warmth at the homes of many strangers.

"Come on in!" she said the residents greeted her as she walked up to their houses.

"I had very good indications that I was going to get elected this time, but you never know what can happen," she said Wednesday, the day after she became the first Green Party candidate to win the

top spot in any municipality in the state.

The path of a third-party candidate is usually a quixotic pursuit, one with few successes. But de Smet and several alternative candidates in Simsbury and New Milford were victorious Tuesday.

At the local level, third parties typically emerge around an issue, said Howard Reiter, a professor of American politics and head of the political science department at the University of Connecticut. That was certainly true in Simsbury, where opposition to a \$200 million, 60-acre project that would mix office, residential and retail space and include a Target store, spawned the Simsbury Citizens First party. John Romano, a

disenchanted GOP selectman topping the party's ticket, placed third in Tuesday's race for first selectman but garnered an impressive 23 percent of the vote. Four other Simsbury Citizens First candidates won seats on various land use boards.

Of course, when the issue fades, the fortunes of the third party tend to fade as well. In East Hampton Tuesday, the fledgling Chatham Party lost three of the five seats it won in 2005, when it seized control of the town council. As in Simsbury, the Chatham Party originally was energized by public concern about development, specifically the town's rapid residential and commercial development.

## Activist And Fixer

De Smet's energy Wednesday defied her claim that she was tired from her hard campaigning. With curly blond hair and blue eyes that were half-hidden behind glasses, she spoke vividly of her triumph and of her plans for the next two years.

She sat in campaign headquarters on Main Street in Willimantic in front of a poster that sums up the Green Party mantra: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

De Smet, 52, knows what it's like to be slightly different. She's a member of the Green Party who has lived, campaigned and been involved heavily in a largely Democratic town. Before beating the town's three-term Democratic first selectman, Michael Paulhus, on Tuesday, de Smet had run unsuccessfully in town for first selectman and the board of selectmen and also for lieutenant governor of the state on the Green Party ticket. A master electrician who refers to herself as a construction worker, de Smet said she's one of fewer than 10 women in her 500-person union.

"I'm not intimidated," she said of her experience in the worlds of work and politics. "And I'm trained to fix things."

State Rep. Walter Pawelkiewicz, D-Windham, said residents sent a message to town government by electing de Smet - but not because of her political affiliation.

"I think more so than people electing a Green Party candidate, I think they elected Jean de Smet," he said. "I think what the voters were looking for was a fresh perspective, and Jean has lots of energy and I think that people really looked more at her as a person than her political ideology."

De Smet is a founder and co-coordinator of the popular Third Thursday Streetfests, which brings thousands of people to downtown Willimantic from May to October.

She organizes and gives wagon tours of Willimantic's Victorian neighborhoods and has helped produce and run a number of local festivals. De Smet has served on the town's affirmative action commission, the open space and conservation commissions, the board of the local food co-op, the YMCA and the Community Land Trust of Windham Inc.

Pawelkiewicz said residents wanted de Smet to translate what she has done as a volunteer into actions as an official.

Christel Donahue, de Smet's campaign co-manager, said it was obvious to her that Windham was ready for something different.

"She has so much potential and enthusiasm that it grabs you. A few were naysayers [who said], 'It can't be done. You can't shake up the establishment.' But I think the naysayers even wanted change," Donahue said.

De Smet said she plans a shake-up when she takes office, the kind that will "turn town hall into a public service" and allow residents to have more involvement in government, such as on advisory boards and committees. She said she wants local residents and businesses to help revitalize downtown by finding ways to use vacant buildings that blight a section of Main Street.

De Smet, who calls herself fiscally conservative and says she wants to pursue energy efficiency in town to save money, said she wants to make Windham more than a nice place to live and work.

"I really believe that a town the size of Windham, with a city and beautiful rural areas around us, [can be] a model for that around the country," she said. "A good, livable city."

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