



Commissioner Susan R. Swecker, Chairwoman Esther H. Vassar, and the Honorable Pamela O'Berry Evans

# These Women Know Their "ABC"

## Female Commissioners

by Libby Carty McNamee

In the 75-year history of the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC), men have traditionally filled the seats as commissioners. However, for the past three years, three highly qualified women from Newport News, Highland County and Richmond have filled the board, with outstanding results, open-toed pumps and colorful business attire: Esther Vassar, Susan Swecker, and Pamela O'Berry Evans. Each of these commissioners, appointed by Gov. Kaine, has channeled her own unique work experience to develop a special area of expertise within the agency, all promoting the overall ABC mission of control, service, and revenue.

As a former English professor, Chairwoman Esther H. Vassar was a natural fit to focus on community alcohol education, social responsibility, and prevention programs addressed to all age groups. ABC has a policy of zero tolerance for underage drinking, targeting high-risk groups such as high school and college students. To this chairwoman's credit, store employees have an impressive 97 percent record of denying alcohol sales to underage buyers. She was instrumental in creating an alcohol education program promoting responsibility to soldiers and sailors through a new military outreach initiative. Also under her direction ABC developed the Alcohol and Aging Awareness Group, responsible for alerting older adults and caregivers to the effects of alcohol on the older population. Chair Vassar is a three-time gubernatorial appointee and the first woman ever to serve consecutive terms on the ABC board.

Commissioner Susan R. Swecker came to the board as a respected attorney with an impressive 25 years in government relations, public relations, and campaign management. She has applied her talents to legislative issues as well as retail marketing and sales in order to enhance revenue at the stores. Fiscal year 2008 was record-setting with \$641.2 million in annual gross sales. As the driving force behind the new "Going Green" program at ABC, Commissioner Swecker notes, "Through our environmental efforts, not only are we doing something good for the environment, it is also good for ABC's bottom line." Under her direction ABC has updated its energy conservation plans and has significantly stepped up its recycling programs with employees. Due to her efforts, the ABC now recycles 364 tons of cardboard, 18 tons of shrink wrap, and 44 tons of paper annually. Next she plans to improve retail spaces to reduce harmful runoff and improve energy efficiency.

Commissioner Pamela O'Berry Evans utilized her well-honed skills developed as a trial

lawyer and as general counsel for the Richmond Police Department. Her area of focus has been the ABC's Bureau of Law Enforcement as well as public safety. As a major initiative she created the new Community Advisory Council (CAC), comprised of ABC licensees, members of state and local government, and representatives from the community. With the goal of making communities safer by improving communication, the CAC now meets in four areas of Virginia to expand the concept of community involvement to a statewide level. Commissioner Evans has worked with the CAC on crime prevention, best practices in ABC enforcement, as well as the implementation of new laws and regulations. Furthermore, under her oversight 130 special agents conducted more than 13,000 criminal investigations during the last fiscal year.

Despite the fact that these women have their own distinct areas of expertise, they have worked as a cohesive team to improve the agency. Commissioner Vassar comments, "Partnerships are key to implementing positive change." However, coming together was not an easy process. Commissioner Evans noted, "The fact that all three of us are women only made the job of persuasion a bit more difficult. We are three of the most diverse—in our thoughts about issues—and independent-minded women I have ever worked with. It helped me develop an under-utilized skill set: namely working in a small team dynamic, to achieve consensus."

Although Commissioner Evans recently left ABC to accept a judgeship as Chesterfield County's newest general district court judge, the three women together have made a positive mark on the Commonwealth. They spearheaded a number of other progressive business, public safety and education initiatives such as retail modernization, Ask for ID, and Alcoholic Energy Drink Awareness.

To this accomplished female trio, we Virginians thank you for a job well done. Bravo! ▼



Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer, impressed by the many accomplishments of this female triumvirate. Check out her web site and parenting blog at [www.libbymcnafee.com](http://www.libbymcnafee.com).