

Merger override vote could be divisive

By TIM RICHARD

analysis

The heat will be on a handful of Republican commissioners in Oakland County when the 27-member board heads for an April 13 showdown vote.

The issue is whether to override Republican County Executive Daniel T. Murphy's veto of the board's decision to merge the drain office and the public works department under a single, new public works commissioner.

Seeking the override is another county Republican—Drain Commissioner George W. Kuhn, who frankly wants a slot at being public works commissioner.

The issue has caused a rift not only between Republican administrators Murphy

and Kuhn but between Republican members of the county board of commissioners.

WHEN THE COUNTY BOARD March 4 voted 18-9 in favor of the merger, six of the then-12 GOP commissioners favored the plan, along with 12 of the 14 Democrats.

The heat will be on them, Kuhn pledges. "I won't twist any arms," but he will use all his powers of persuasion to keep them in the "yes" column.

The six are James Dancavay of Highland Township, Wallace Gobler of Royal Oak, Henry Hood of Troy, Joseph Montante of Orchard Lake, William Patterson of Clawson and Richard Wilcox of Brandon Township.

Six other Republicans are likely to stand with Murphy and continue to oppose the merger. They are Paul Kasper of Bloomfield Hills, Jack McDonald of Farmington Hills, Lillian Moffitt of Bloomfield Township, Fred Houghton of Rochester, Patrick Nowak of Farmington Hills and Robert Page of Birmingham.

They will be joined by Dennis Murphy, a Republican from Novi, who was elected to fill a vacancy late last month.

MURPHIVES contend that when voters adopted the permissive county executive system, the law abolished the board of public works which governs the DPW. Authority over the DPW, they say, should logically fall to the county executive.

That won't work, says Kuhn. Public Act 139, which allows the county executive system, "provides no bonding or financing authorities."

Kuhn insists. Those favoring assignment of the DPW to the county executive are playing Russian roulette with all jobs in the department. The reason, Murphy would be able to boss the department but would be unable to float the bonds to pay for sewer and water projects.

INSTEAD, SAYS KUHN, the county board should override Murphy's veto of the merger decision and complete the merger.

That's because the law allowing such a merger under a public works commissioner does provide for financing authorities.

That won't work, says Kuhn. Public Act 139 so that the county executive law can have the necessary financial powers.

A realistic understanding of the political facts involved suggests this will be a long time, if ever, in coming," Kuhn says.

"It is all well and good for some to now stand aloof and pontificate about an impossible ideal," Kuhn says, referring in particular to Mrs. Moffitt, an outspoken backer of the county executive, and to unnamed editorialists. "But in the real world of business and government, progress is made by regular and steady progress using

available tools—and he underlines the word "available."

THE POLITICAL implications are many and weighty.

If Kuhn succeeds in getting the override, will a county board controlled 18-13 by Democrats appoint him the first public works commissioner? The public works commissioner would have to run in the November election and thereafter to keep the job.

If Murphy's strength falls, can he expect an intra party challenge in the August primary? Will his reputation be tarnished by having his chances of re-election in November?

If Kuhn fails to win the override, what will he do? Stay on the GOP ticket this year with a county executive with whom he's at war? Switch to another party? Oppose Murphy in the executive primary in August?

It is not yet April 13, and that is the date the Oakland County Board of Commissioners has chosen to take up the question of Murphy's veto.

An override requires a two-thirds vote—18. An 18 vote bloc passed the merger last month. If the Democrats and dissenting Republicans are to override the veto, they cannot afford to let a single vote slip away.

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