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Civil Defense Dept. labeled a 'disaster'

By ALICE COLLINS

March's destructive ice storm and the tornado that devastated sections of West Bloomfield have focused public attention on the Oakland County Disaster Control and Civil Defense Department and its director, John Dent.

And the result may be the abolition of the department. Its responsibilities would be transferred to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department.

County Commissioner Mary Mead Dearborn (Birmingham) introduced a resolution Thursday calling for the change. "We've had several disasters here recently," she said. "We haven't been prepared for any of them."

The biggest disaster of all is the county department of civil defense and disaster control.

Commissioner Henry W. Root (R-Troy) also introduced a resolution Thursday concerning the disaster control department. He said he would put that and the animal control departments under the county mental system.

UNDER THAT SYSTEM, directors of these departments would no longer be political appointees of the majority party of the board of commissioners.

John Dent, who has been disaster control director hip for about a year at a salary of \$17,000, could not be reached by telephone to comment.

Mike Niemann, director of public information for the county, called Root's resolution "basically one of housekeeping." Most appointments are made either by the county executive or are under the merit system.

"Such a change in those two departments has been discussed on and off for some time," said Niemann.

"But it probably became more of a matter of commission attention after the ice storm," he said.

A highly publicized effort, spearheaded by Beverly Hills housewife Sue Kuhn, to use civil defense sirens to proclaim a tornado watch has also spotlighted Defense Coordinator Dent.

Dent said he has had a similar plan on the books, and he and Mrs. Kuhn have been urging that communities adopt it. Mrs. Kuhn has expressed disappointment at the slow response that has come from plans to the county's 11 governmental units for joint implementation of such an emergency system.

"CIVIL DEFENSE in Oakland County is more of a political conversation piece than an effective warning system," she charged recently.

In response, Dent maintained that he is doing everything possible to bring about a countywide tornado alert system.

Both of the resolutions introduced Thursday have been referred to committees for study and recommendation and may come before the full board of commissioners May 20.

Mrs. Dearborn said Mrs. Kuhn has been invited to appear before the public services committee to discuss her ideas. The sheriff's department is also expected to offer input.

"At this point, exactly what the unified tornado alert system would be is up to the experts," said Mrs. Dearborn. "But I believe Mrs. Kuhn has a good idea."

"The board of commissioners is required by law to provide this (civil defense) service. I believe how we do it is up to us. I hope we can all work together."

"IT'S VERY CLEAR to me that any kind of effective program for disaster control has got to be organized by a solid, ongoing agency with necessary back up."

"Our existing disaster control department, at best, is tiny," she said.

Niemann said the administration of Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy (Republican) agrees with the Root resolution to place the disaster control department on the merit system.

"We (the administration) are not taking any position on her (Mrs. Dearborn's) resolution yet," Niemann said. "One fundamental question is whether the federal government would allow civil defense to go under another agency."

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