

# New commissioners vow support of senior housing

By MARY CONNELLY-SZCZESNY

Whether Birmingham will have a senior housing project continues to rage in the city.

City commissioners ousted at the polls Monday and those who campaigned for housing proposals defeated by voters claim that senior housing in Birmingham is dead.

Newly elected commissioners deny that and say they will work for senior housing acceptable to residents. Voters on Monday overwhelmingly rejected two senior citizen housing proposals.

The first ballot issue, calling for a \$6 million bond issue to finance housing, was pummeled by voters. 5,900 voters said "no" to the proposal to use city

taxes to build the project and subsidize the rents. Only 615 favored the plan.

The second proposal was also rejected. That one called for the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) to finance the project. Up to 50 single-family houses would have been rehabilitated and rented to low- and moderate-income families in order to obtain the financing.

The plan went under when 4,561 residents voted against it. Only 1,772 voters backed it.

THE HOUSING controversy has divided the city in recent weeks and was behind the ouster of three incumbent commissioners who had supported the state-financing proposal.

During the bitter campaign, both sides charged the other with distorting the facts about the housing plan.

Mayor Dorothy Conrad said this week that the defeat of both ballot proposals signaled the death of senior housing in Birmingham.

"I believe because of the outcome of the senior housing issue and the candidates that senior housing is dead," Mayor Conrad said. "I can't see it right now. I don't know where we'd go. I don't know of any way to fund it."

The city has spent eight years studying possible ways to build and finance the project, she added.

"I THINK it's dead," agreed ousted Commissioner Arthur Underwood Jr. "I don't think this (newly-elected) group wants senior housing."

"Obviously, they don't want government intervention," said defeated Commissioner Samuel Staples, referring to the state-financed project. "I guess they don't want senior housing either."

But all three newly elected commissioners denied the charges.

Asked if senior housing was dead, William York responded, "Of course not. It's just starting."

He said he would favor an in-depth study to determine what seniors need in Birmingham.

Some seniors, he suggested, might want assistance to remain in their own homes. Any plans he favored would be carried out without state or federal money, he added.

GARY KAIN, also newly elected at

the polls Monday, agreed.

"It's not dead," he said of senior housing. "We're going to explore other areas without federal government strings."

"I feel we should serve the kind of people we have and find out what their individual needs are," said new Commissioner George "Bert" Jackson.

"Initially, we should have an unbiased study to determine what their real needs are. Based on that, the next thing would be to seek a building proposal based on those findings and that would meet the site restrictions and be compatible with the surroundings."

BIRMINGHAM NOW has a contract with the nonprofit Baldwin House Corp. to build and manage a 150-unit senior housing complex on the northwest corner of Chester and Merrill.

That contract expires May 6. Corporation Vice-President Glenn Asquith Jr. said Tuesday a meeting with the Baldwin House attorney will be held "to consider the alternatives for future actions."

"Unfortunately, the real losers of this election are the senior citizens who have waited so long for Baldwin House to be built," Asquith said. "High rents are pricing them out of this community, and the present

efforts to provide a decent, affordable place to live for those who helped to build this city are now in jeopardy."

DURING THE campaign, the three newly elected commissioners had indicated they favored rebuilding the senior housing project.

Asquith said Tuesday Baldwin House does not expect to sue the city to retain the contract and build senior housing.

"I don't believe a lawsuit would be one of the options," he said. "It's not productive."

"Despite the outcome of this election, I still believe in this town and in its ability to make a creative response to the situations it faces," he said.

A PRO-HOUSING citizen's group, People Who Care About Birmingham, had pushed for passage of the state-financed housing package. The group had made literature drops, held coffee and conducted a telephone campaign.

Group co-chairman Richard Sanderson said the housing issue was one of the most difficult he had been involved in during 28 years in politics.

He said the complexity of the issue hampered efforts to persuade voters to support Baldwin House's proposal.

## At the polls

## Senior housing supporters ousted

By MARY CONNELLY-SZCZESNY

Backed by a grass roots organization, three political newcomers will join Birmingham's seven-member city council.

Three incumbent city commissioners were ousted at the polls Monday after a hard and bitter fight over senior citizen housing.

Even the aftermath of the campaign has been marked by charges of racism, smear tactics and lies.

Voters Monday turned out to oust commissioners Herbert Ring, Samuel Staples and Arthur Underwood Jr. All three had supported a controversial senior citizen housing plan that would have required Birmingham to provide low and moderate income rental housing.

In the wake of the incumbents' overwhelming defeat, three newcomers have been swept into office after campaigning against the controversial housing plan.

George "Bert" Jackson, Gary Kain and William York will be sworn in Monday, and each will serve three years on the commission.

The three-man coalition beat the incumbents and an independent candidate, Barton O. Johnson, by relying on a corps of volunteers and a lot of personal contact with voters.

"I FEEL fantastic," said top-vote getter York, who pulled in 3,115 votes.

"The power is back in the hands of the people. You're going to have a

responsive and responsible government."

York and Kain did not join the crowd at city hall Monday who watched the votes being tallied.

Instead, both tossed victory parties.

Nancy Elby, an Aspen street resident, who led the anti-housing campaign, was jubilant.

Ms. Elby in November launched an opposition movement considered responsible for the ouster of the three incumbents and the defeat of the housing plans at the polls.

She also successfully petitioned for a recall election aimed at turning out of office three other city commissioners. That election will be held May 8.

"I FEEL terrific, the best I've felt in six months," Ms. Elby said Monday night. "I think the people were very much concerned with the issue and they made themselves educated and informed."

Ms. Elby said she has not decided if she will be candidate for the commission if a vacancy is created by the recall election.

If there was laughter and jubilation at the victory parties, it certainly wasn't matched at a gathering of incumbents and pro-housing forces who met at the Machus Sly Fox after the vote.

Samuel Staples, one of the senior members of the commission who had served since 1972, said he didn't know if he would run in future elections.

"It's too early to tell," he said. "However, I will certainly be active and continue to support Birmingham."

Former Commissioner Ring, however, indicated Monday he would run for election again. He said that if a vacancy is created by the recall election May 8, he will seek another term on the commission.

A BRIEF city commission meeting held before the votes were counted was marked by tension. Midway through the meeting, Staples blurted a short goodbye.

"My past three years have been great fun. I've enjoyed working with this commission."

"I hope I'll see you all next week," he added optimistically.

But Staples, Underwood and Ring were ousted by wide margins.

The unofficial vote breakdowns indicate the following vote totals: York, 3,115; Kain, 3,043; Jackson, 3,019; Underwood, 2,509; Staples, 2,431; Ring, 2,334; Johnson, 1,801.

The voter turnout was large for a city election. About 44 per cent of the registered voters cast ballots.

That compares with the 1977 city election when less than 3 per cent of the voters went to the polls.

Statements of campaign costs have not yet been filed, but York indicated he spent about \$270 on the campaign. Jackson estimated his expenses at under \$500, and Kain would only say he spent over \$500.

YORK SAID he visited more than 300 homes in his quest for votes and attended three to four meetings a week with residents throughout the city.

"We went out and we stumped and knocked on doors," Kain said. "Our neighbors and friends came out."

Kain and York have no prior involvement in city politics. Jackson has been chairman of the city's housing board of appeals for two years.

A resident of 575 W. Frank, Jackson is self-employed as a licensed residential builder.

Kain, 42, of 186 Banbury is self-employed as an attorney with offices in Bloomfield Hills.

York, 686 Kennesaw, is a vice-president, sales manager with Eller Outdoor Advertising Co. of Michigan, Detroit.

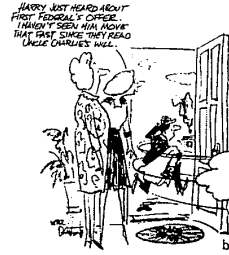


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