

Suburban caucus

Year-old bloc trying to prod Capitol Hill

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

A "suburban caucus" has blossomed on Washington's Capitol Hill, but to many people, even some of the most powerful members of congress, it is a well-kept secret.

Little news of the caucus has trickled back to metropolitan Detroit, even though U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell (R-Plymouth) and James Blanchard (D-Pleasant Ridge) were among the first to join the movement.

The caucus' leaders say it has grown to include 50 members with near equal numbers from both parties and is on its way to becoming one of the largest caucuses on "the Hill."

Yet, although the caucus jelled about a year ago, according to most estimates, it still lacks an office, a staff, and according to some old Washington hands, any effectiveness.

Its board of directors, however, is trying to change all that.

Their success will be measured by whether they achieve their goal: Changing the federal government's attitude towards the suburbs. They contend that the Livonias and Farmingtons of America are forgotten by federal officials who devote most of their attention to the big central cities and rural areas.

"WE DON'T WANT to criticize the big cities, but it's time for the suburbs to be unified," Pursell said. "We just want some fairness."

Blanchard's sentiments were stronger and more direct.

"I and my constituents have more in common with the suburbs in Minnesota and New York than we have with the central city of Detroit," he said.

"There just has to be some sensitivity to suburban America."

THERE IS, however, some disagreement within the caucus over how they should approach the problems of suburbia.

Some congressmen, like Oakland County's Blanchard, say the caucus should try to build a coalition power bloc which can exert influence on legislation and executive policy.

Others, including one of the caucus' organizers, Rep. Ron Mottl (D-Ohio), say the emphasis should be on redirecting home some of the federal dollars now targeted for the large central cities. Mottl's constituency is centered in the Cleveland suburb of Parma.

"WE'LL HAVE BEEN a success if can just get suburban input into the process," Blanchard said. "I'm reluctant to say there should be a special suburban package, but we might have to do it," he added.

"We have to focus on the fact," Blanchard said, "that many older suburbs and middle class suburbs are not considered when we legislate."

According to Blanchard, many suburbs are facing the same problems as the older central cities. "We're not all rolling in champagne and living in fancy houses," he said.

He pointed to the problems faced by tiny, mostly black Royal Oak Township, nestled along Eight Mile between Oak Park and Ferndale. "It has a much higher unemployment rate than Detroit. It's poorer. Its housing stock is poorer," he said.

"It's almost impossible for them to get any financial help whatsoever."

BLANCHARD'S OTHER big task for the caucus is to press for less strict guidelines on the spending of federal aid. Conflict over those guidelines, called "strings" by critics, has existed for years.

The most publicized battles have been over federal housing aid and whether such money is being spent in the suburbs to perpetuate racial discrimination. This year, Livonia lost at least \$1 million in future housing aid because of its refusal to comply with certain guidelines. Birmingham has been threatened with loss of aid because of its recent rejection of a low-income housing plan.

"I don't like all the strings that HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) wants to attach to every little thing," Blanchard said.

"We want the feds to give federal officials credit for knowing their own problems and how to deal with them."

"There's all this thinking of quotas and formulas. Its often counter-productive. I see this as rigid thinking on the part of people in Washington and Lansing," he said.

POLICYMAKING IS important, agrees Ohio's Mottl, but money is the bottom line.

"The suburbs never get any funds," Mottl charged. For every \$3 the suburbs send to Washington, they get \$1 back, he said. Conversely, for every dollar the central cities send to Washington, they get \$3 back.

Blanchard and Pursell agree. "The residents of smaller suburbs have been getting the short end of the stick when it comes to federal funding," Blanchard said.

THE GROUP'S GOALS may be clear, but the verdict is still out on its effectiveness and influence. It can boast of some small victories—a recent discussion between several suburban officials and President Jimmy Carter's chief urban policy advisor, Stuart Eisenstat, for example.

Mottl, as the group's Democratic troubleshooter, is trying to arrange a similar meeting between some caucus members, prominent suburban governmental officials and Carter.

That may be more difficult, concedes Pursell. "We don't have access to the president. No one in Michigan has access to the president, except (Detroit Mayor) Coleman Young," he said.

AROUND THE HALLS of congress, the caucus' effectiveness and even its existence are questioned.

In spite of bipartisan membership, a cross-section of political philosophies and such members as William Ford (D-Mich.) of Taylor, Mark Hammarford (D-Cal.), Edward Derwinski (R-Ill.), Tom Lucken (D-Ohio), John Wylder (R-N.Y.), Robert Young (D-Mo.), and Douglas Walgren (D-Pa.), some of congress' powerbrokers and top urban strategists say they've never heard of the caucus. House Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill (D-Mass.) was unavailable for comment, but one of his top

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—U.S. Rep. James Blanchard

aides, Gary Hymel, said the caucus has never approached O'Neill's offices.

"I don't know anything about it," Hymel said. "I guess they work in other areas. They've never asked us to do anything for them," he said.

According to the office of U.S. Rep. John Conyers, an influential Detroit in the Michigan delegation, the suburban caucus has not made any contact with them.

"It's the first I'm hearing of it," responded one of Conyers' senior aides. "If they're operating, it must be a covert operation," he said.

THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION is not taking the suburban caucus quite as lightly, though, especially after the caucus' meeting with Eisenstat.

At that meeting a number of suburban officials, including Livonia Mayor Edward Menamara, criticized Carter's proposed urban policy and HUD. Pursell called the officials' attack "blistering."

The administration, however, maintains that the caucus' objections are off base.

"When we met with the caucus," said one administration official, "we maintained that none of our policies should and do exclude the suburban areas that have need."

The official also disagreed with Mottl's charges that suburbs are not getting a fair share of their tax money back in services and programs.

"To the extent that a suburb has need, it will be included. If an area has no need at all, it will not be included," he said.

THE DIFFERENCES OF opinion are not likely to be resolved immediately, caucus members agree.

But they say it is too early write off their efforts and influence.

"We're only a neophyte organization," Mottl said. "But they're beginning to take us more seriously. There will be a time when we carry major clout," he predicted.

"The caucus is only in the embryonic stage," Blanchard said. "It's much too early to claim success and its certainly too early to say we've failed."

"I don't know if in five years we'll be considered a success or a failure," he concluded.

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