

Detroit foe pushed for control of water board

By TOM LONERGAN
and TIM RICHARD

George Kuhn says he doesn't want to "build an empire." But the Oakland County drain commissioner would like to leave a monument.

The monument he has in mind is regional control of the water and sewerage department that serves some 100 southeastern Michigan communities. Since it was founded, the department has been under the total control of the city of Detroit. The board members and director are all appointees of the Detroit mayor.

Tuesday morning Kuhn and his political friends in the suburbs will launch a petition drive to regionalize the water board on a one-person, one vote basis. Detroit would have three of the nine seats.

FOR MUCH of his political career, Kuhn has been at odds with Detroit, the city where he was born and grew up.

As mayor of Berkley in the early 1960s, he led a group of suburban mayors opposed to a city income tax on non-residents working in Detroit.

As a Republican state senator from 1967-70, he was at odds with leading Detroit black politicians over civil disturbance-related laws in response to the 1967 riot.

And as drain commissioner since 1972, the West Bloomfield resident has

been a persistent critic of the Detroit sewer and water system management and rate hikes. He is aiming for a referendum on the November 1980 ballot. Both critics and allies of George Kuhn on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners consider him a very able politician.

KUHN, 54, was born in the Trumbull and Grand River area. His father, a doctor, was once president of the Detroit Board of Education.

Kuhn grew up in the Boston-Chicago Boulevard area. During the 1930s, it was "considered one of the nicer spots," he said. Now a historical district, the area has been referred to as the "Bloomfield Hills of the '30s."

His paper route customers along Boston Boulevard included such prominent names as the Fishers and Briggs.

In the 1940s, Kuhn's service in the Navy during World War II was sandwiched between college. He graduated from Central Michigan University in 1947 in business administration. His naval training as a fiscal officer included courses at Harvard.

The post-war years saw Kuhn join Ford Motor Co. management. From supervisor of manufacturing and assembly coordination at the Highland Park plant, he was promoted to the production development staff under Ford's then-vice president Robert S. McNamara, who was later company



GEORGE KUHN
A new issue

president and then secretary of defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. McNamara is president of the World Bank.

IN THE 1950s, Kuhn, a life-long Republican, was part of the beginning white exodus from Detroit for the northern and western suburbs. In Berkley, Kuhn began his political career.

After election to the Berkley city council in 1957, Kuhn was elected mayor in 1959 and served four terms.

He was chairman of the Vigilance Tax Committee of Michigan, a group of suburban mayors opposed to Detroit's proposed 1 percent income tax on non-residents working in the city. The tax was eventually implemented by then Gov. George Romney, but reduced to 0.5 percent of annual income.

Kuhn was elected to the state senate in 1965 from a district that included the lakes area of Oakland County and northwestern Wayne County.

As a member of a senate investigating committee after the 1967 riot, Kuhn said laws he proposed led him to be characterized by then-Sen. Coleman Young of Detroit and long-time Sen. Basil Brown of Highland Park as "illy white George Kuhn of suburbia trying to keep peace in the city."

Kuhn had proposed that assembly of people in Detroit be limited and the

city have the right to call in the National Guard to quell any disturbance.

KUHN'S POLITICAL battles haven't always been with Detroit Democrats.

For the past five years, he and Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy, also a Republican, have been at odds over the merger of the drain commission with the county's department of public works.

Both agree they should be merged. But Murphy wants the merged departments under his administration as part of unifying county government under the executive.

Kuhn maintains both departments should be under a separately elected public works commissioner.

Current state law doesn't give a county Board of Public Works, under the executive, the power to issue bonds or build new sewer systems. That authority is under the drain commissioner.

Both sides have been in court over

the issue since 1975. But the issue won't likely be resolved until the Michigan Legislature strengthens Public Act 139, which allows counties to adopt the county executive form of government.

Since the only executive of a large Michigan county is a Republican, the Democratic-controlled legislature has kept the county executive law relatively weak.

THE MERGER issue is a "sore spot" with him, Kuhn admits. In a recent interview, he insisted on talking about the challenge to the Detroit sewer and water utility rather than his differences with Murphy.

"We're too busy to be playing games for political power," he said.

Kuhn said regionalization of the sewer and water system is "long over due." While his dispute with Murphy over the public works merger has split the board of commissioners, both Democrats and Republicans on the GOP-dominated board applaud Kuhn's challenge of sewer and water rate hikes.

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