

Dems fight for shot at Murphy

Lawyer goes after mayor

By TOM LONERGAN

Two Democrats who claim Oakland County lacks an effective leader hope to survive Tuesday's primary election for county executive.

The successful one will likely face Republican incumbent Daniel T. Murphy in the Nov. 4 general election.

Murphy is expected to easily defeat his primary opponent, William Richards of Royal Oak, who has campaigned little.

THE DEMOCRATIC candidates are P. Thomas Lewand, 33, a corporate lawyer and county commissioner from Royal Oak, and George W. Suarez, 54, part-time Madison Heights mayor and director of purchasing for the Oakland County Road Commission.

Lewand, who announced his candidacy in March, has the backing of the county Democratic Party organization.

He has spent \$30,000, according to campaign spending reports filed with the county elections division last week, while Suarez has spent less than \$1,000.

"If money elects people, he'll get elected," Suarez said. "He has resources that I do not have."

Both candidates are seeking county-wide office for the first time.

Lewand's favorite campaign phrase is that Murphy has been "a phantom in the office." That means, he says, that the six-year county executive "has not been a strong or forceful leader on any issue of county-wide importance."

Suarez, who fashions himself as "the people's champion in the fight against the subway," says Murphy "has been noticeably absent when he should have been noticeably up-front."

The most recent example Suarez gave was the legislative battle earlier this year in Lansing over initial funding of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority's (SEMTA) regional transportation plan, which includes a rapid rail line that would be underground in Detroit.

LEWAND POINTS to a poll he paid for as evidence that Murphy hasn't been an "effective spokesman" for a county of nearly a million people.



George W. Suarez (above) and his opponent F. Thomas Lewand (pictured right).

The poll, conducted earlier this year, showed three out of four persons couldn't name the county executive, says Lewand.

Murphy's "key failure," according to the Democrat, is "an inability to go to Washington and Lansing and bring home needed revenues." The one-term county commissioner said 25 percent of the county's \$87 million budget is from state and federal sources.

SUAREZ'S MAIN issue is the subway and the county's continued participation in SEMTA.

Suarez was one of several road commission lobbyists who opposed initial state funding for a subway's final engineering study.

Suarez agrees with a year-old road commission study that recommends the county leave SEMTA and establish its own transportation system. He maintains the county could do this without a tax increase.

"The fare box and federal and state government contributions" could cover the operation of a county-run system, he said.

If taxpayers have to fund an operating deficit in the future for SEMTA or a county-run system, Suarez says, "I would advocate free rides."

Lewand says he opposes the subway



because of its "tremendous cost." He's opposed to the county leaving SEMTA, citing that state laws would have to be amended to allow it.

BOTH PRIMARY opponents say SEMTA should be providing better east-west bus service and that its small bus program in the county should be expanded.

Lewand favors a surface light rail rapid transit line from Detroit to Pontiac, part of a plan the county board started pushing after SEMTA adopted its plan late last year. Suarez favors an all-bus regional plan.

Both Democrats said the county should do more to clean up and monitor toxic waste dumps.

Where's Richards?

Murphy works alone

By TOM LONERGAN

Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy has been dubbed a "phantom in the office" by his leading Democratic rival.

Murphy could well use the term for his Republican primary opponent, William Richards of Royal Oak.

"I haven't figured out why he's in the race yet, anyway," said Murphy, who is seeking his second consecutive term in the county's top administrative job.

"He hasn't made any statements, so we haven't made any," Murphy added during a recent interview.

RICHARDS, a former chairman of the county board, former drain commissioner and former member of the board of road commissioners, didn't show up for a scheduled interview with the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers this week.

Richards also failed to answer a League of Women Voters questionnaire on the primary.

He hasn't had to file detailed expense statements with the county elections division because he has spent less than \$500.

Richards now runs a bar in Royal Oak.

MURPHY SAYS he "hasn't got out on the campaign trail yet."

Nonetheless, he's often a guest speaker at numerous luncheons and meetings. "I don't consider (that) campaigning, because I do it year round," he said.

Murphy bristles at the campaign criticism from his two Democratic opponents that he hasn't been an effective leader for the county.

"What they say they will do, and what they can do with the responsibility and the law they work with, are two different things," said Murphy.

"I don't see a lot of issues in this campaign."

The county executive's office has been established in Oakland County since 1974. Murphy has been its only occupant.

"I think we've proven it can work," he said, despite the fact that county government remains fragmented with a separate road commission, separate parks commission and divided public works duties between the drain commissioner and a Public Works Department under the executive.

Murphy would like to see roads, parks and all public works functions consolidated under the board of commissioners and executive, but adds, "There's not a chance of making that happen in the Democratic-controlled (Michigan) Legislature."

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