

Brodhead bows out

A surprising last hurrah

BILL BRODHEAD was on the phone.
"How are you, Bill?"
"Fine, fine — no, I'm not fine."
He was hurting, and the agony sounded clearly in his voice Wednesday morning. "I have no energy. I'm simply burned out."

Trying to explain the abrupt decision he made last week to retire from his 17th District seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, Brodhead couldn't really define it all.

"It was something I thought about for a long time," he said. "Kathi (his wife) and our boys talked, too."

Then last Tuesday morning over coffee, they agreed he'd really had it with the intense pressures of being a member of Congress.

Though the popular Democrat's surprising decision seemed almost an

impulse, it came after deep thought over a long period of time.

Decision made, he called his Washington office and told the staff to watch the cable television connection to the House.

"They knew something big was up immediately," said Pat Thornton, an aide in the local office and one of his longest political associates. "No one had written any speech for him."

Brodhead, who stunned his Congressional colleagues, staff and constituents, amazed himself as well. He dotes on politics and loved the job, the challenges, the chance to help people, to meet with presidents and heads of state.

"FOR BILL, meeting (someone) who got out of the USSR has always been as important as meeting any foreign diplomat of high rank," said Rae Ann Sharfman, a Southfield activist for Soviet Jewry.

"In matters of human rights, he's in the forefront, a true leader, no matter whose rights are involved."

I asked the congressman what he considered his most important

achievement of all those years, eight in Congress, and four in the Michigan Statehouse.

"Looking back, it's the things I tried to do for the retarded and handicapped," he said. "Government should look out for people who can't help themselves — otherwise, why do we need government?"

Even now, preparing to tie it all up by the end of the year, Brodhead has just been honored with a Bread for the World Award.

"Bill is the only person in Michigan to win this, and one of the few in the Congress," said Thornton. "Bill stands for all the things important to me in government, and that's why I've been here. Last night was full of tears."

"WHEN MARTHA Griffiths suddenly resigned eight years ago after 20 years in the Congress, everyone said 'He'll never fill her shoes.'"

Thornton admits her boss was keenly disappointed at not being consulted more on the revamping of state Congressional districts.

"He deeply regretted losing 200,000 Detroit constituents that he cared about and being left to represent 16 different small communities."

"After he made that speech from the floor of the House, we got a call here from radio station WXYZ. They asked us to confirm what they had heard."

"I told them we can't confirm that because we don't believe it," she said. After that, they were inundated with calls from media, friends and constituents.

"Some who didn't even know him cried, and one said, 'Who will take care of us now?'"

The tax hike has passed and the living is easy

WEDNESDAY WAS a slow day in Lansing. Chairman Michael O'Brien had scheduled a 9 a.m. meeting of the Senate State and Veterans Affairs Committee to consider an amendment to the Open Meetings Act. It seems the education lobby wants a batch of amendments to cripple our beloved "sunshine law" so it can handle more topics in secret and let the voters know only what daddy wants them to know.

A few minutes after 9, Sen. O'Brien, D-Detroit, entered and lit up a cigarette. At 9:40 a second member, Sen. Ed Fredericks, R-Holland, came by. "Nobody here. Might as well cancel," said Fredericks, and he left the room.

THE OTHER three committee members never showed up. Sen. Joe Mack, D-Ironwood, had an excused absence that day. Sen. Doug Ross, D-Southfield, was stunned by the news that 17th District Congressman Bill Brodhead was dropping out; a million reporters were calling him, and Ross was gearing up to run for Congress.

The last member of the committee was Sen. Robert VanderLaan, R-Kentwood, the minority leader. He was in a leadership meeting beating up on Gov. Milliken's executive order for cutting out too much state aid to schools. So the State and Veterans Affairs Committee had to do without him.

In such an event, no news was good news. The Open Meetings Act remains unamended.

At 10 a.m. O'Brien packed up his gavel because it was time for the day's session of the full Senate.

LT. Gov. James Brickley stopped to say hello. "The place is like a tomb," said the Senate's presiding officer, looking over the chamber. "This week is an anti-climax to the income tax vote. People are running for other offices or not seeking re-election."

He was right. Ross and Jack Faxon, D-Detroit, are itching to run for Congress. David Plawewski of Dearborn Heights, Kerry Kammer of Pontiac and Ed Pierce of Ann Arbor are running for the Democratic nomination for governor. Tom Guastello, D-St. Clair, who cast a deciding vote for the tax measure, isn't seeking reelection. John Hertel, D-Harper Woods, was supposed to announce for Wayne County executive two months ago but may be having second thoughts as Livonia Mayor Ed McNamara piles up the endorsements.

PIERCE CAME by. "The income tax shut down the Senate for a month," he said. "The election will shut it down for three months."

The income tax vote may have had an air of excitement — those cliff-hanger votes and the repeated attempts to win passage. But I couldn't think of them as the Michigan Legislature's finest hours, even though I approved of the outcome.

First, the House of Representatives was kept in session until dawn one Friday to get the 56th vote. That didn't mean there was intelligent deliberation going in. It was a knock-down, drag-out affair.

The same with the Senate votes. One evening 37 of the 38 lairds were kept up and worked over without success. The next afternoon, votes Nos. 20, 21 and 22 were won over.

The three who switched were Democrats James DeSana of Wyandotte, Dana Wilson of Hazel Park and Thomas Guastello of St. Clair.

GUASTELLO was generally seen as the key. Rumors circulated that he was offered a judgeship by Milliken and a city attorney contract in a Macomb County suburb when he leaves the Legislature.

We chatted in his office after the Senate's session was over. He denied the offers or that they could have influenced his vote. He pulled out a copy of some budget figures. Keep in mind that the 1 percent tax hike would raise nearly \$300 million.

"I sat here with Jerry Miller (budget director) until 2 a.m. that day," he said. "We looked for every possible cut we could find. We put down everything. When we got done, we had only \$100 million."

With that logic staring him in the face, Guastello next day voted for the tax hike after extending from Miller and Gov. Milliken a promise of \$50 million more in budget cuts. That was the executive order which came down late Thursday.

AND SO, as the Legislature recovers from the exhausting weeks-long battle over the budget, other things don't get done.

The potholes on our freeways, highways and county roads get filled, but the road don't get the kind of repaving they need. College tuitions continue to rise. SEMTA continues to wither.

What reminds me: It was a shocking phenomenon to drive west on I-95 at 8 a.m. Wednesday and see bumper-to-bumper traffic from Brighton on into town heading east, most with only a driver, a few with two persons. Then you have to figure each vehicle costs \$6,000 to \$12,000.

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