

Shut out!

Dems can't get funds to try GOP for closing doors

A Democratic Oakland County commissioner broke ranks with her party when she objected to "spending taxpayers' dollars" to challenge in court alleged violations of the state's Open Meetings Act.

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"The court finding won't make any difference any way," Fortino said at a finance committee meeting last week. "You guys (Republicans) will do what you damn well please regardless of the finding."

AS EXPECTED, the Republican-dominated committee voted to table a proposal to hire an attorney to seek a court ruling on the matter.

Other Democrats, however, said they won't let the issue die, even if Republicans continually put it on the back burner.

They say Republicans unlawfully barred Democratic commissioners from a caucus last month. The Republican caucus also barred reporters and the public from its meeting to discuss "negotiations and personnel matters."

"If this body decides against allocating the money for an attorney, we will

still pursue a case," said Commissioner Lawrence Pernick, D-Southfield. "You're acting on dangerous ground by saying this to escalate," Pernick said.

PERNICK AID Democrats have been forced to take legal action because the city prosecutor "looked the other way."

Chief assistant prosecutor Richard Thompson remanded that "contradictions and ambiguities in the law leave us no alternative but to wait for a court decision with wide jurisdiction to settle the question."

But Democrats contend an attorney general's opinion, issued in 1978, substantiates the case that Republicans violated the Open Meetings Act. That opinion was based on a similar case in Ingham County.

"A DEMOCRATIC attorney general told 17 Democratic commissioners that

they couldn't exclude four Republicans from their caucus meetings," said Commissioner James Doyon, D-Madison Heights.

"Under the law, you have the right to exclude the public and the press from meetings dealing with personnel matters, but you don't have the right to bar other members of the same elected body."

The Open Meetings Act allows public bodies — boards, commissions, committees and councils — to conduct closed meetings when discussing labor negotiations or in hearing an employee discipline case — at the option of the

employee. However, it doesn't specifically address whether partisan caucuses are permitted to take the same action.

Commissioner James Lanni, R-Royal Oak, believes partisan caucuses should be allowed to meet behind closed doors when discussing personnel matters.

"I think it's wrong that the state legislature allows its Democratic caucus to have closed meetings while forcing county caucuses to have open meetings," Lanni said. "Until that's turned around, I don't see why county caucuses should have to comply."

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A statewide conference to introduce early childhood teachers to computers will be held from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, May 14, in 203 O'Dowd Hall at Oakland University, Avon Township.

Entitled "Helping Young Children into the 21st Century," the conference is sponsored by the Early Childhood area of the OU School of Human and Educational Services and Computer Horizons of Livonia.

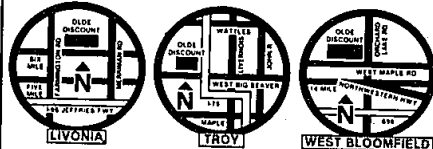
Fee is \$10 per person. Registration information is available from Anne Cairns Federlein, 377-3077.

The opening address on "Children, Computers and Classrooms" will be given by Carl Berger of the University of Michigan.

Representatives from local school districts will present workshops.

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