Willoughby job with Murphy draws Dems' fire

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Oakland County is looking for someone to cajole grants, shared revenue and favorable laws out of state and federal legislators.

And who knows better how to do that than a former legislator?

That's the reasoning of Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy, who this week is expected to name fellow Republican L. Jean Willoughby to a $34,305 job on his staff as federal and state aid coordinator.

Some commissioners made it clear they would prefer it go to a non-artisan civil servant rather than an opponent.

CREATION OF the new post was approved 16-9 Thursday by the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

Only Republicans voted yes. One Republican, Sue Kuhn of Clawson, joined eight Democrats in opposition.

Calling it the "Willoughby Unemployment Compensation Bill," Democratic opponents urged the position be filled through the county merit system instead of political patronage.

"We cannot continue to give a friend a job when we're cutting out deputies and hours," said Commissioner Betty Fortino, D-Pontiac, calling the appointment a "sham."

Backers, who did not say publicly who would get the position, contend it requires a supporter of the county executive's policies.

WILLOUGHBY, who was not at the commission meeting, confirmed that she expects to get the appointment. But she would have applied for it even if the position had been a merit system one.

"I feel it's perfectly acceptable either way," explained Willoughby, a state representative for one term. "The job is what I wanted. I think it's exactly where I should be."

The resolution also did away with the grants development administrator position, which paid $36,907 to $43,409. Russ Martin, who held that merit system job, is now the county's management and budget director.

DEPUTY COUNTY Executive Patrick Nowak, who in an interview wouldn't deny Willoughby will be given the job, said the coordinator will have less responsibility and a lower salary than Martin had.

"There are a lot less grants to administer," Nowak explained, adding Murphy wants a legislative lobbyist rather than a budget analyst for the new position.

"Clearly this person will be lobbying on behalf of the administration and should be part of its thinking — not just a civil servant."

Nowak said he would find "the Democrats' railing to be a little less hollow if they were as critical of their administration in Lansing. The litany of political appointees is as long as your arm."

SPEAKING AGAINST the resolution were Democrats Dennis Aaron of Oak Park, Fortino, Hubert Price Jr. of Pontiac and James A. Doyon of Madison Heights.

Aaron suggested the lobbyist position is intended to help Murphy win re-election. He also expressed doubts about the executive's choice for the job.

"When you come up with a job description like this and a candidate like this, you're not talking about priorities or good government. You're just feathering your own nest," Aaron said.

Aaron criticized Willoughby's ability to work with Democrats and even some Republicans during her term in Lansing.

REPUBLICAN Commissioner Marilyn Gosling of Bloomfield Hills objected to Aaron's personal criticism of Willoughby. "I think it's ungentlemanly and uncalled for to cast slurs on a person not here."

Price offered an amendment to place the job under the merit system. "At minimum, we want to assure residents of Oakland County that this will be filled on a fair basis," he explained.

Doyon called the upcoming appointment the "worst kept secret in Oakland County," adding:

"I do believe firmly that it is being created for a person rather than a function. If the function is needed, it should be merit. If it's political patronage, it should be up front."

WHILE COMMISSIONERS were debating, the mother of six was on her way home from New York where her oldest son had surgery.

"I'm just glad it's settled," said Willoughby, named Mother of the Year in 1982 by the Michigan Mothers Association. "Even though I knew there was a possibility of it coming up, my mind was on other things."

The 58-year-old Republican became active in party politics after returning to college at age 47. A registered nurse, she has a bachelor's degree in communications and a master's degree in political science.

"Journalism brings you into current events, and by the time I finished my master's I was really involved," she said.

The issue of appointing Jean Willoughby as federal and state aid coordinator for Oakland County was referred to by the Democrats as the 'Jean Willoughby Unemployment Compensation bill.' After the Birmingham/Bloomfield area was redistricted last year, the former state legislator lost her seat in the Republican primary to Rep. Ruth McNamee.

L. Jean Willoughby
"ready to plunge in"

Financial planning seminar at OU

Sid Mittra, president of Coordinated Financial Planning and professor of management at Oakland University, will conduct a financial planning seminar from 8-9:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Michigan State University Management Center in Troy.

Topics may include budget analysis, children's education, tax shelters, stocks and bond investments, wills and trusts, financial independence, inflation problems, interest rates, mutual funds and estate planing.

The seminar, co-sponsored by Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, is free, but registration is required. Call 643-8888.

Madonna enrollment this week

Madonna College is conducting fall registration from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday in the administration building. The college is at I-96 and Levan Road in Livonia.

Classes start Tuesday, Sept. 6. Madonna offers associate and bachelor's degrees in more than 50 career-oriented programs. Graduate courses for master's in administration also are available. Students may choose day, evening or weekend classes.

Persons not admitted previously should contact the admissions office.

Students registering through Friday, Aug. 19, are required to pay 50 percent of their tuition that day. They will be billed for the remaining 50 percent Thursday, Oct. 13. Tuition for most undergraduate courses is $65 per credit and $100 for graduate credit.

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