

# Dems say county scandal looms

By Kathy Parrish  
staff writer

It's jokingly called the "Battersgate" scandal. But Democrats aren't kidding about charges that Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy used public food for private fund-raisers.

Despite a county audit and State Police investigation, they're not convinced Republicans provided their own pancakes and syrup for the events. And Democratic commissioners intend to ask for a grand jury investigation if they don't get answers soon.

"IT'S A whitewash," charged Commissioner Betty Fortino, D-Pontiac, who said she found lots of contradictions in the just-released audit.

"I hope we can do something to have some kind of proper investigation. I hope we don't have to go to a grand jury."

Commissioner Lawrence Pernick, D-Southfield, called the audit "disappointing." But that's what he expected of an investigation "done by people who report to the person being investigated."

"Allegations have been made of grand misuse of public funds for private purposes. And that's a crime," stressed Pernick.

"At a time when the public has concerns over the credibility of public officials, there has to be some sort of outside investigation."

THE FLAP grew out of an Oakland Press investigation of the county's food-service operation. The paper alleged that food from the courthouse cafeteria was served at political fund-raisers for Murphy. A Feb. 19 article said Murphy admitted food was "diverted" and served at a 1980 spaghetti dinner and senior-citizen pancake breakfasts in 1980 and 1981.

But after the internal audit ordered by his office, the executive told county commissioners there was no "wrongful use of food or other items."

Murphy said food was donated but not shown on his finance reports because volunteers failed to fill out proper forms.

Released to the public Monday, the audit reported finding "no direct evidence or testimony — nor any indirect evidence or testimony — that would indicate that items were ever used from the food services for the fund-raisers other than those events which were properly billed and paid for."

THE EXECUTIVE, though, did ask State Police to look into the growing controversy. That investigation ended quickly when no crime showed up.

Inspector Stuart Hutchings said the audit showed food-service management problems, but no criminal wrongdoing. So state police decided not to probe further.

"Our business is to investigate crime," explained the assistant district commander in charge of crim-

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inal investigations.

"Otherwise we're witch hunting, and we're not going to do that."

To charges that police backed off on the case because it involves Murphy, Hutchings said politics never influences his work.

"We're the State Police. We're not involved in that county," he said firmly. "And the executive branch I work for is now run by Democrats."

BUT COUNTY DEMOCRATS, long concerned about cafeteria deficits, are still suspicious.

Last week deputy county executive William Spilloni told them State Police wrapped up their investigation and found no wrongdoing.

Objecting to not seeing the audit, Democrats also questioned why the matter is not being probed further.

Pernick, frequently the Democratic caucus spokesman, said the county prosecutor, state attorney general and State Police all refused to investigate.

"The irony is that we can't find any branch of law enforcement to investigate wrong doing," said Pernick. "The only way, then, to get an investigation is to ask for a grand jury."

"I'M GOING to make one more effort to try to

clarify what happened and why it happened," Spilloni told angry Democrats.

"After a very thorough investigation, the attorney general, prosecutor and state police all found no factual evidence to pursue this."

"No one is making accusations. What you have is a reporter going through campaign materials and coming to conclusions not based in fact," he added.

"A reasonable person can conclude the matter is closed."

MURPHY STAFFERS said the executive's office took the investigation very seriously. For one thing, the executive doesn't want an election year scandal.

"We don't want an October surprise," said Patrick W. Nowak, deputy county executive and Murphy's chief political aide.

"Look at it from our point of view politically. And that's what this is — politics. Whenever the opposite party sees something they can put in the worst possible light, they do it."

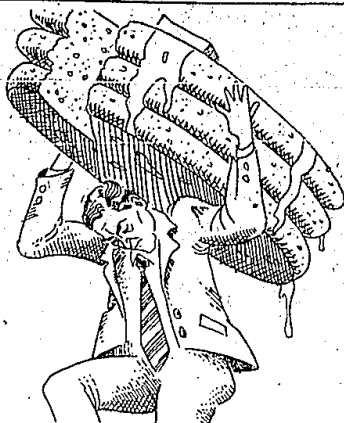
Pernick, who has been raising questions about the county-food-service management for years, disagrees strongly.

"The best way to make sure there is no political corruption is to make sure there is an outside, independent body investigating charges. That way it cannot be a political thing," said the commissioner from Southfield.

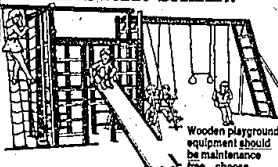
"This is clearly a Watergate-type coverup where those involved are going around yelling 'politics' and hoping it will go away."

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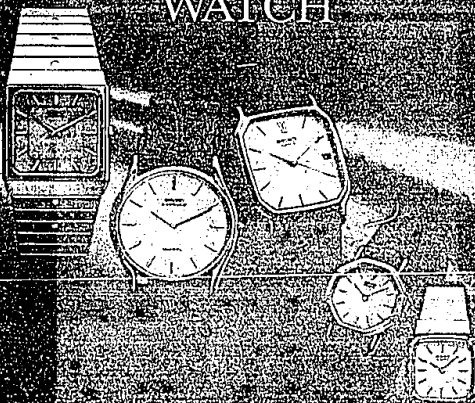
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