

Oakland drain rivals travel different routes

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

As a "good" Democrat, Darlene Berent let the party put her name on the 1984 ballot.
A veteran of two unsuccessful races — for Madison Heights City Council and state Senate — the executive director of Oakland County's Democratic Party prefers to work behind the scenes getting other people elected.
And challenging Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn is like trying to halt spring flooding. One of the county's Republican leadership "team," he has a long political record and a last name that attracts votes.

BUT ADMITTEDLY too much of a "political animal" not to run once in a race, Berent has been plugging away.
And to the surprise of many, she won the same "well qualified" rating the three-term drain commissioner got from Civic Searchlight/Oakland Citizens League. That made her the only Democratic challenger to rank with an incumbent in the prestigious ratings.
"People wouldn't let me not run," explained Berent, 48. The mother of four originally said she would put her name on the ballot, but wouldn't go through another election.
"And I feel that if you run for something, you've got to give it your all."

UNLIKE THE hotly contested races for county executive and sheriff, the candidates for drain commissioner haven't even met.
And that's the way Kuhn wants it. An outspoken officeholder who thinks nothing of challenging his longtime opponent Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, the West Bloomfield resident won't debate his challenger.
"My opponent — whatever her name is — and I don't get involved to the same places," he quips.
"I've got the record to stand on," added Kuhn, 59, whose political opponents have included some of his own department members.
"I don't think I need to debate. I'll stand on my own record."



George Kuhn
"stand on my record"



Darlene Berent
"give it your all"

THAT RECORD is under attack by Berent, who charges that the drain commissioner isn't accessible to residents, has no concern for environmental issues and has no long-range plan for preserving county water.
She contends Kuhn "just puts in sewers to carry the water away. He has no plan to put the water back in the ground."
"People are becoming more concerned about the environment," said Berent, environmental action chairperson for the General Federation of Women's Clubs.
"In a few years, water is going to be gold. Other states already want our water."
A longtime politician and former United Auto Workers Political Action worker, Berent wants to let people know what the county job entails. "If I do nothing else, I'm going to educate people about what the drain commissioner does."

IN HIS CAMPAIGN appearances, Kuhn outlines a long list of achievements during his 12 years as drain commissioner.
The \$48,655 administrator is responsible for all established drains, including creeks, rivers, ditches, sanitary sewers and storm sewers. The office has responsibility for new drain construction, maintenance of drains and establishment of water management districts.
A former Berkeley city councilman and mayor, Kuhn got into city government because of concern over massive flooding in his community.
He takes credit for getting south Oakland "off the dime" on the 12 town drain, which serves 14 communities. "It was dead in the water," recalled Kuhn, who pushed for a ban on area construction until the drain was approved.
"I never thought 20 years later I'd be drain commissioner."

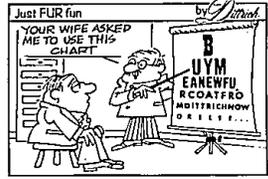
AFTER SERVING one term as state senator, Kuhn lost a GOP primary in 1970. Two years later, he won a warmly contested primary for drain commissioner.
In office, he takes credit for environmental programs like a soil erosion program and formation of lake improvement boards, and partial consolidation of the DPW into the drain office.
He cut his staff from a peak of 208 in 1979 to 59 this year, largely because of lack of state and federal money to fund sewer construction.
Kuhn's biggest claim to fame is his attempt to regionalize control of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Board.
As head of Citizens for a Regional Water and Sewer System, he is determined to get "fair and equal representation" on those Detroit-run operations for the nearly 100 communities which but its services.
"All the other communities are subsidizing De-

troit," charged Kuhn. "It's everybody's system."
Through Kuhn's office, Oakland County is suing in U.S. District Court to get its taxpayers reimbursed for high water rates. The drain commissioner also is seeking damages for alleged sewage treatment overcharges incurred because of the bribery scandal involving Vista Disposal Co.

ALTHOUGH CONCERNED about sewage treatment rates, Berent believes the water rate case is a "waste of time."
"Water from Detroit is cheap. It's the suburban communities adding their share that runs the cost up," said the Madison Heights resident.
She contends that the drain commissioner is not accessible to the public he represents, and that most residents don't even know what the job entails.
"I don't know everything about drains and sewers, but there are engineers who do," she said.
"But the key for politicians is to be a servant — to know what people want."
Her big issue is long-range planning. An environmentalist who believes water should be put back into the ground, Berent says Kuhn's solution is to "just flush it away."

"I've got the record to stand on," says Kuhn, whose political opponents have included some of his own department members. "I don't think I need to debate. I'll stand on my own record." He quips, "My opponent — whatever her name is — and I don't get involved to the same places."

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— Darlene Berent



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