

Always in the minority, board Dems still enjoy

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Year after year, their political numbers dwindle. Month after month, they get slapped down by party-line votes.

Yet Democrats have some of the highest seniority on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners — a median of 12 years. Seldom do they think of running for the Michigan Legislature or U.S. Congress, where they would be in the majority party.

Why? "I love it," answered Alexander Perinoff, whose 23 years on the county board go back to when Oakland had a sprawling board of supervisors.

"Even though we're outnumbered, we're not out-thought," said James Doyon, a 12-year veteran from Troy Heights, whose district includes part of Troy.

DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS leader Larry Perinick, an 18-year veteran from Southfield, confesses he has frustrations and thinks of chucking it. But Democrats say that if they keep plugging away with their ideas for a few years, majority Republicans frequently come around to their way of thinking.

And they like the absence of lobbying pressure and spirit of independence the 27 members of the county board enjoy. While commissioners are paid only \$18,000, some \$20,000 less than state legislators, Oakland board members don't have to travel to Lansing and sacrifice family life.

They disagree about whether the county board should be non-partisan. Doyon, the youngest of the bunch, once introduced a resolution suggesting board seats be non-partisan. "It didn't even get into committee," he recalled.

IN THE EARLY 1970s, Democrats enjoyed a 17-10 majority. As late as 1976, when two Republicans defected, Democrats had a 15-12 majority.

Since the 1976 election, however, Re-

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D-Southfield



'It's easy to sit outside and grumble. But I like contributing rather than carping.'
Alexander Perinoff
D-Southfield



publicans have been in charge and now command a 20-7 lead.

"Democrats have borne two tremendous curses," said Dennis Aaron of Oak Park, now in his 16th year — "gerrymandering of districts and the losses in the Reagan sweeps." He smiles: "Tomorrow's another day." In this case, tomorrow would be 1992, after the next census.

COUNTY BOARD politics have become more partisan in recent years, Democrats complain.

"Newly elected (Republican) commissioners become vice chairmen of committees," said Perinoff. "It's sad in our county — not a single Democrat is a chairman or vice chairman." When his party controlled the body, he said, Republicans were given vice chairmanships.

Democrats have gradually been washed off boards and commissions, he added. Perinoff is still on the airport committee, but most other posts have been filled with GOP appointees. "It's a shame you don't get a more diverse view," he said.

Doyon said the situation has "disintegrated in the last couple of years to really heavy partisan crap." He charged Republicans, when they meet in caucus prior to the full board meeting, change their minds on issues on which bipartisan committees have made recommendations.

Perinick frequently states a Democratic view on an issue, only to be met with stony silence from the right side of the room.

WHILE COUNTY problems are non-partisan, Aaron says party labels are useful in telling voters the kind of thinking a candidate brings to the board.

"Democrats are concerned for the welfare of large groups and use government as a means to solve social and economic problems. Persons are more important than corporations, political action committees and pressure groups."

"You'll always have groups which will line up," agreed Perinick. "Partisan government defines issues better. You can come to better decisions in the long run."

In 1974 the parties split fairly sharply on whether to create an elected county executive (which Democrats espoused) or an appointed county manager (the prevailing Republican view).

Voters chose the executive plan, but picked Republican Daniel T. Murphy to run it.

Only Perinoff opposes the executive plan. Democrats say Murphy has a "bloated" staff, and each year they try to amend the budget to cut it, usually losing by a 19-8 or 20-7 vote. But others think the decision to have an accountable, visible executive was essentially correct.

WHAT DO they feel they've accom-

plished in the face of the Republican majority?

- Persuading the GOP to use surpluses for tax reduction (Perinoff).
- Getting rid of Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson's Organized Crime Task Force (Perinoff).
- Getting a \$3.5 million wave pool

for the south end at Red Oaks Park (Doyon). "I remember working on cutting an open ditch there when I was a member of the Jaycees," he said.

• Being first to advocate a 911 emergency telephone plan, due to be implemented in the next year or two (Doyon and Perinick).

• Getting townships to contribute to the Sheriff's Road Patrol. Democrats, joined by Republicans representing cities, oppose "subsidies" to townships.

• Moving a county treasurer tax collection station into the Road Commission office in Beverly Hills, for the convenience of south-end residents (Perinick). Next goal: a clerk's office in the south end so residents won't have a 40-mile round trip to Pontiac for a wedding license.

• Establishing a county medical care facility for long-term patients whom hospitals can't afford to treat (Perinick).

In December Democrats came within a vote or two of another goal — consolidating the executive's public works office under the drain commissioner. Conservative Republicans loyal to Drain Commissioner George Kuhn voted with Democrats and gave County Executive Murphy a scare on that one.

PERINOFF, a lawyer, likes the part-time nature of the commissioner's job.

"I've passed up two opportunities to run for state rep.," said Doyon, who likes the "egalitarian system" of county commissioners compared to the more partisan atmosphere of Lansing. He sees himself as more successful in committee work than in the full 27-member board.

Lawyer Aaron watched fellow Oak Park resident Joe Forbes maintain two homes as a member of the Legislature and decided it wasn't for him.

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