

Next Murphy goal: home rule for county

By Tim Richard
staff writer

It's no secret. This will be Daniel T. Murphy's last term as Oakland County executive — the one ending in 1988.

After that he will work for county reform on a new front.

"When I leave office," Murphy said in an interview last week, "I want to work on home rule."

Murphy, 62, who became Michigan's first county executive in 1974, has had problems from the beginning because the reorganization law, in his view, made too few changes.

Home rule could complete the job.

SEVERAL STEPS would be necessary, and Murphy could be active in any and all:

- Persuading voters to set up a charter commission.
- Serving on the charter commission — 27 members would be elected, one from each of the county commissioner districts.
- Selling voters on adopting the finished product.
- Asking the state Legislature for permissive legislation to give the executive broader authority than what is already allowed by the limited County Home Rule Act.

MURPHY HAS already tried the last step by seeking changes in the executive's powers — without success.

"Legislators today have a different outlook," he said, citing Wayne County's experience in getting lawmakers to allow abolition of the powerful Road Commission.

That battle pitted reformers against Michael Berry, longtime chairman of the Wayne County Road Commission and generally considered the most potent Democrat in the county after Detroit Mayor Coleman Young. The WCRS not only controlled roads but ran county parks,

'Once this board makes a decision, everybody ought to be in line — county government, the Road Commission, the drain commissioner.'

— Daniel T. Murphy
home rule advocate

Metropolitan Airport and Willow Run Airport.

All are now under the jurisdiction of Wayne County Executive William Lucas.

WHEN WAYNE County voters adopted their charter in 1981, no one cheered louder than Oakland's Murphy.

Republican Murphy figured he and Lucas, then a Democrat, could go "hand in hand" to Lansing to get the Legislature to make changes both would like. Local governments are, after all, creatures of the state and have only the powers and structures state law gives them.

It was not to be. For one thing, Wayne County's charter was written under authority of a separate act applying only to counties of more than 2 million population.

For a second, Lucas had state Sen. James DeSana, D-Wyandotte, quietly sponsor more than a dozen amendments that affected only the Wayne County Home Rule Act — not the general Home Rule Act or executive act.



Daniel T. Murphy
now work ahead

But Murphy thinks the atmosphere has changed. Moreover, the political climate has changed, with Republicans winning control of the state Senate in 1984 and likely to hang onto it.

EVEN AS MURPHY chatted, the county Board of Commissioners was stamping approval to an elaborate deal whereby county government would advance the city of Auburn Hills \$2.5 million for road engineering, the city would turn the money over to the Oakland County Road Commission, and the Road Commission would hire the city's engineer to do the work — all for the benefit of the giant Chrysler Corp. project.

Everyone cooperated, but in the view of Murphy and his deputy, Patrick Nowak, the deal was needlessly complicated.

Nowak pointed out that any agency could have torpedoed the project, and Oakland County could kiss 20,000 new jobs goodbye.

"Everybody ought to be in line," said Murphy — "county government, the Road Commission, the drain commissioner."

"Once this board makes a decision, everybody ought to be in line," he repeated.

"AND THIS board (of 27) can operate with a smaller group. My idea is five to nine. Many big counties across the country have a small policy board of five members and a manager."

Besides being more compact, a smaller board would think more in countywide terms, Murphy said.

"They get in here and think they're here to represent a local unit of government," he said. The executive is particularly critical of cease-

less rural vs. south end arguments over who gets what services and who pays for them.

MURPHY STARTED his political career as county clerk and register of deeds, then was picked to chair the three-member, budget-writing Board of Auditors.

But there was ferment to bring all the separate public works, veterans, planning and other proliferating agencies under a single officeholder.

In 1973, then-state Sen. Carl Pursell, R-Plymouth, wrote an optional County Reorganization Act. Under it, voters could choose either an appointive county manager (much like a city manager) or elective county executive.

Republicans generally opted for the manager; Democrats, the elected executive.

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