

Oakland vs. Detroit — Alexander dumped

By Tim Richard
staff writer

R.J. Alexander, retired governmental consultant from Birmingham, was philosophical after Oakland County forces succeeded in dumping him from the board of SEMTA, the seven-county transit authority.

"I don't vote with Detroit," I vote my conscience after studying issues," Alexander said in reply to critics from his own county.

"I was thinking of withdrawing (from the SEMTA race) but changed

my mind. The hell with them," he said after his loss.

The battle also reopened old wounds about how SEMTA directors are picked (see other story).

THE BATTLEGROUND was SEMCOG, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, which picks some directors for the 15-member SEMTA board.

It was a classical joust, with Detroit and Wayne County supporting Alexander for a new three-year term on SEMTA versus Oakland and the

outlying counties supporting Thomas D. Dunleavy, supervisor of rural Highland Township (pop. 17,000).

Dunleavy won, 37-28, ending Alexander's nine years on the SEMTA board.

Oakland County Commissioners Marilyn Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills, Nancy McConnell, R-Bloomfield Township, Jack Olsen, R-Huntington Woods, and Ralph Nelson, R-Rochester, actively supported Dunleavy.

"You should represent the Alexander county," It doesn't mean you put on blinders — but remember where you come from," McConnell said of Alexander during a caucus.



issues — twice on selecting a general manager, once on adopting a Detroit yellow-and-green color scheme instead of SEMTA's red-and-orange pattern, and against a committee structure favored by suburbanites and opposed by Detroiters.

"There was an over-all perception that he was more interested in Detroit. He never asked our opinion once," said Gosling, vice chairman of the Oakland County board.

A Washtenaw County delegate said SEMTA appeared Detroit-dominated in dropping rail plans for Ann Arbor and Mount Clemens and instead proceeding on the controversial downtown Detroit People Mover.

Olsen told the SEMCOG General Assembly that "R.J. served us well many years. I'm sure. He was a great spokesman for bringing 'the word' from SEMCOG and SEMTA to the out-counties.

"But there has been a change. Now we need someone to bring the word from the out-counties to

SEMTA and SEMCOG."

In the post-election interview, Alexander said Oakland commissioners never had been specific about which of his votes they disliked.)

"DETROIT PULLED out all the stops" to save Alexander, Gosling said, and it appeared that way.

In June the SEMCOG General Assembly deadlocked twice, 28-28, between Alexander and Dunleavy. After drawing lots, SEMCOG Chairman Robert Smith declared Dunleavy the winner.

A few days later, a written protest came from Tom Turner, then chairman of SEMTA. Turner is an appointee of Detroit Mayor Coleman Young. His full-time job is president of the Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO.

Oakland commissioners noted the letter was written on AFL-CIO stationery with a carbon copy to Mayor Young.

Other letters of protest came from cities in Wayne County.

An attorney from the Detroit law firm of Miller Canfield agreed with Turner that SEMCOG had violated its own bylaws, and that the election required a majority vote. A second election was set last week.

Meanwhile, Alexander was entitled to remain on the SEMTA board because no successor had been named.

IN LAST week's SEMCOG General Assembly debate, Alexander was warmly praised by Keith Archer, the new SEMTA chairman.

Archer, a Dearborn city official appointed to the SEMTA board by Wayne County Executive William Lucas, called Alexander "an invaluable fount of experience. I need help. Mr. Alexander is one of those sources of help."

Archer called Dunleavy "decent" but "an unknown quantity."

Alexander, with a reputation as a "regionalist," was director of Oakland County's public works department until his retirement in 1975.

SEMTA system angers Oakland

The battle against R.J. Alexander's re-election to the Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority board reopened old wounds about how SEMTA directors are picked.

Oakland County commissioners complained again about the method, set up in 1976 and 1980 state laws. They say Oakland lacks control over its own representatives on the SEMTA board.

THE SYSTEM works like this:

- The Detroit mayor picks four directors without city council confirmation.
- Suburban Wayne County members are picked by County Executive William Lucas, a Detroit resident.
- The Macomb County board picks two members.
- Oakland's three members are picked by a hodgepodge of methods. One is chosen by the County Board of Commissioners, and two Oakland seats are filled by the SEMCOG General Assembly from lists nominated by caucuses of local Oakland officials.

Usually, SEMCOG picks whomever is the "preferred" choice of the Oakland officials in a "you-scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours" arrangement.

But that unwritten agreement broke down last week as Detroit, Wayne County and the AFL-CIO backed Alexander against the wishes of Oakland County commissioners and some local officials.

operations was passed last spring by the state Senate but is locked up in a House committee.

GOSLING SAID Alexander had voted with Detroit SEMTA members and against suburbanites on several

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