

Murphy: Time ripe to absorb road panel

Second of two articles.

By Tim Richard
staff writer

He has proposed it before. Now, however, the timing is much better for County Executive Daniel Murphy to bring the Road Commission under Oakland County's general government.

"It's a matter of accountability and efficiency," said Patrick Nowak, Murphy's chief deputy. "The Road Commission doesn't have the political clout to get new revenue. We need to develop revenue sufficient for a bond issue. There are so many projects that it will take a bond issue. We can't string them out over 50 years."

IN THE 1970s, shortly after Oakland voters adopted the unified county administrative system with an elected executive, Republican Murphy twice sought legislation to bring the Road Commission administration under his wing.

It was no go — not with Democrats controlling both houses of the Michigan Legislature and no precedent for the change.

In 1984, Wayne County Executive William Lucas, still a Democrat, broke the ice by winning a permissive law allowing home-rule counties to abolish their road commissions. Wayne voters approved a charter amendment. The Wayne County Road Commission's duties were brought under the elected Wayne County Commission. Its staff was brought into the executive's public works agency.

Oakland is still a Public Act 139 county — unified county government, not a home rule county. It can't put a proposal to abolish the Road Commission before Oakland voters. Oakland still must get permissive legislation through Lansing.

MEANWHILE, the Oakland County Road Commission (OCRC) found itself with demand for road improvements to accommodate the high-technology boom from Rochester to Farmington Hills.

In 1985, OCRC Managing Director John Grubba added up the "wish lists" of cities, townships and villages and found they totalled \$740 million over 10 years — that is, \$740 million more than existing revenue

His issue is accountability. 'All I want is to appoint the (roads) manager the way I appoint the airport manager and the DPW manager.'

— Daniel T. Murphy
Oakland County executive



sources could produce.

The OCRC's three-man board is appointed by the county board of commissioners and has no political constituency of its own, as Nowak pointed out.

And the OCRC's leadership knew it. "We specifically asked that others make use of our work and take the lead for funding," OCRC Chairman Fred Houghton told the county board

last week.

Again: "We hope that, after conducting the hearings, the (board's) transportation committee, the county board and the county executive will feel it's worthwhile to take a stand and join in taking the lead to get funding desperately needed for roads," Houghton said.

MURPHY REASONS: It general

county government is going to put its prestige on the line before the voters and Legislature, then general county government should run the road system.

It's not like the days when the road commission could live off its 38-percent share of state gasoline and weight taxes.

Murphy isn't out after Grubba's head. "John Grubba, in my opinion, is very intelligent. I think John Grubba is a manager who carries out the functions of the board he works for," Murphy said. "All I want is to appoint the (roads) manager the way I appoint the airport manager and the DPW manager."

As executive, Murphy fields calls about roads from many rate payers who think he's in charge.

"Ninety percent of the calls we receive are about roads," added Roy Rowland, R-Rochester Hills, chairman of the 27-member county board.

THE CASE for unification is summed up by two-term Commissioner David Moffitt, R-Bloomfield Township:

"PA 139, adopted by voters in 1974, mandated a unified form of county under a county executive. I believe it's consistent with the voters' intentions in adopting this form of government that the Road Commission ultimately be consolidated under the county executive,

with budgetary control to reside with the board."

But veteran Commissioner John McDonald, R-Farmington, who chairs the board's transportation committee, is cooler to the idea.

"I was leaning toward it at one time," McDonald said last week. "But lots of states are going the

other way — independent boards to keep roads out of the political arena — and do projects according to need rather than political pressure," he said.

McDonald likes the OCRC's proposal: Whatever money for roads the general county government raises, it should control.

Rival road plans

Current law

Status: County Road Commission is arm of state government, organized on a county basis. It is a body corporate, not arm of Oakland County government.

Board: Three members appointed by the county board of commissioners for six-year, staggered terms. No restrictions on party.

Administrator: Managing director is appointed and evaluated by road commission.

Board's duties: Approve budget, establish work program, settle lawsuits, establish policies.

Funds: Share of state gasoline and weight taxes. Contracts with county general government and local units for extra work that the other units pay for.

Murphy plan

Status: County Road Commission becomes arm of Oakland County general government, like airports and parks.

Board: Still appointed by county board of commissioners but with shorter lease — two-year terms, bipartisan basis.

Administrator: Becomes a department head appointed by the county executive.

Board's duties: Approve budget, establish work program with state funds. Many details to be worked out.

Funds: Continued share of state gasoline and weight taxes. Continued contracts with local units. Murphy envisions \$300 million or so bond issue to pump in additional revenue.

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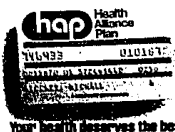
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