

Murphy, Nichols feud over safety officers

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Oakland officials are hoping some quiet, behind-the-scenes negotiations will end what appears to be a fiery turf war between County Executive Dan Murphy and Sheriff John Nichols — or at least get it out of the newspapers.

"I understand there was a meeting yesterday afternoon," said Hoy Rewold, R-Rochester, chairman of the board of commissioners. "They might be able to work something out."

Talk explores Nobel winner

The Continuing Education Division of Oakland University will take a look at the life and genius of Nobel Prize winner Richard P. Feynman as part of its "Enigma of Genius" lecture Thursday, Nov. 16.

Abraham R. Liboff, director of medical physics graduate studies at OU, will conduct the lecture at 7 p.m. in Meadow Brook Hall. Cost is \$13.

Feynman, who died last February, had an unusual approach to life, according to Liboff. "He worked against the grain and had the creative ability to move outside of the usual pathways," Liboff said. "His philosophy of the universe was that it functioned in a simple way and its mysteries could be unlocked."

Liboff said Feynman was known to be brash and fiercely honest with an incredible zest for life, including a love for bongo drums.

At the age of 24, Feynman joined the Manhattan Project — to develop the atom bomb — and in 1965 won the Nobel Prize in physics for fundamental work in quantum electrodynamics.

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Rewold and other commissioners are reluctant to comment about the dispute, other than to confirm it exists.

Aside from concern about alienating either of the strong-willed Republicans, commissioners believe Murphy and Nichols are experienced and savvy enough to resolve their own problems.

AT PRESENT, the dispute centers around a decision by Nichols to defrock members of the Oakland County Public Safety Division, a separate security force that answers to the executive.

The force performs a number of quasi-police functions, including enforcing traffic warrants, arresting disorderly people and checking county facilities at night, or "raiding doorknobs," as some put it.

Security officers also provide a police presence in county parks, and carry out diverse assignments like accompanying money couriers. A few carry sidearms and all belong to a separate police unit that answers to the county executive.

LAST MONTH Nichols took deputy status away from the 69-member force.

The move triggered some harsh words from the executive. But Nichols said he pulled arrest powers from public safety officers because

of what he considered to be sloppy investigative procedures.

At a Republican caucus prior to Thursday's board of commissioners meeting, Nichols explained his move — and jabbed at Murphy. In a fiery 20-minute talk, Nichols likened the public safety unit to a "Praetorian guard," serving not the public, but its master. . . . Murphy.

"I have been accused by the County Executive of dishonesty in my dealings with him," Nichols said. "I submit the dishonesty lies in passing off the County Safety Division on the people of Oakland County as a bonafide, operational, service-oriented police entity."

The executive proposes \$2.3 million (in the 1990-91 budget) for a shrunken police force that disregards proven police procedures of accountability, Nichols said, "while duly constituted public offices (like the sheriff's) must come hat-in-hand for funding programs like the child-abuse unit, more narcotics officers and court officers."

NEITHER MURPHY nor any of his representatives addressed the GOP caucus.

During an interview Wednesday, however, Murphy suggested Nichols either wanted to expand his department or secretly coveted the executive's office.

"It's his discretion to yank deputy powers," Murphy said. "After all, he granted them in the first place."

That was in 1985, after Nichols was first elected.

"If he wants to be executive," said Murphy, mindful that Nichols ran for mayor of Detroit in 1973, "he should run for office."

Nichols' complaints about improper or sloppy investigative work is simply an excuse for doing something he wanted to do anyway, Murphy said.

"He's got an ego problem," Murphy said. "He never confers with me about problems or how to get things done."

Reminded that Nichols' predecessor, Johannes F. Spreen, also terminated deputy powers for public safety officers, Murphy responded with a sigh of exasperation: "But Spreen was a Democrat."

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—John F. Nichols,
Oakland County sheriff

COMMISSIONERS EXPECT some compromise to be worked out between Murphy and Nichols to restore deputy powers to safety officers so they effectively provide the security that everyone agrees is needed.

One possibility, commissioners speculate privately, is Nichols tak-

ing over the security function — and redefining officers — but assigning some to Murphy on a contractual basis.

Some commissioners see the dispute as an opportunity to some long-desired changes, such as combining the dispatch functions of the sheriff's department and the public safety unit.

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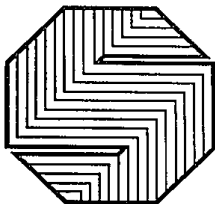
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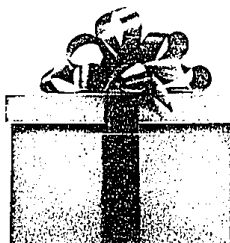
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