Oakland wary of 'full management' mental health

By Susan DeMaggio
staff writer

Fearing the county may be left holding the expensive mental health bag usually financed by the state, the Oakland Board of Commissioners has voted to send an investigative team to Lansing.

At its semi-monthly meeting Thursday, the board voted 23-1 to call it an investigating team — rather than a negotiating team — after several commissioners said they are not ready to accept the "full management" contract for services prepared by the state.

"We want to send a message that full management is not a done deal," said Commissioner Marilynn E. Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills, who chaired the committee investigating full management.

"We did fact-finding in our committee," said Gosling. "We came up with 35 concerns for the state mental health director and he met with us and answered them. He did not agree with all our proposals, however, and that's where the team comes in."

Under existing law, the county and state share responsibilities for managing the estimated $120 million spent for mental health in Oakland County yearly. While the two parties share management functions, the state pays about 90 percent of the cost.

THE QUESTION facing county officials is whether or not they want to assume full management of mental health services, with the state continuing to provide most of the money.

But commissioners, as indicated by Gosling, are leery.

Of the mental health agencies across the state, only Macomb and Oakland counties are yet to opt for assuming full management responsibilities.

Critics argue that the state, which is required to provide mental health services by the Mental Health Code of 1963, may reduce its level of funding — or back out completely — once counties assume full management.

Commissioners are further concerned that in the interest of saving money, officials may sacrifice the quality of service to the developmentally disabled and mentally ill.

Barbara Bergum, a vocal opponent of full management and leader of a parents advocacy group, said the responsibility for providing mental health services should remain with the state.

"Under full management we'll see groups competing for service contracts by offering the cheapest care. If that doesn't scare a parent, I don't know what does," she said. "Our guarantees are with the state. We may not win this issue, but we're gonna fight."

Richard Cooper, director of the county Community Mental Health Services, said he sees full management as a "shifting of dollars.

"WE HOPE TO replace the expensive state services with less expensive community-based programs," he said. "I am aware of the concerns of the parents voicing their opposition, but through the dollars we hope to save, we will be able to increase and improve services."

Commissioner Donn Wolf, R-Farmington Hills, argued against full management.

"I'm not convinced we should do it," he said. "The state will give us the responsibility, but the funds won't follow. My main concern is the clients. I know there's a clause that we can give it back to the state, but that's impractical. I'm just not sold on all this."

The investigating team the board will send to Lansing will include the Director of Community Mental Health, the Director of the Department of Management and Budget, the Director of Program Evaluation and Operations Analysis for the Board of Commissioners, Corporation Counsel, one member of the Board of Commissioners and the Deputy Treasurer.

Russell Martin, director of management and budget, said no time frame has been established for the team's making its first trip to Lansing.

> ***'We want to send a message that full management is not a done deal.'***
>
> *— Marilynn E. Gosling*
> *Oakland County Commissioner*

Surplus rolled over

By Susan DeMaggio
staff writer

The County Board of Commissioners voted to close out the year-end budget with a surplus of $5 million rolled over to next year.

The action sparked sharp words from Commissioner Dennis Aaron, D-Oak Park, who said the hefty balance should instead by reimbursed to taxpayers.

"I object, as I do every year, Mr. Chairman, and I suggest that your budget process is ludicrous," Aaron said. "We start off the year insisting this is a bare bones budget . . . yet we have a $5 million surplus.

"Did we extract $5 million too much?" he asked. "If this is the case, I call for a reduction of county tax."

Commissioner John Olsen, R-Huntington Woods, was quick to respond, insisting the existing budget process is sound and fiscally responsible.

"From my experience, if you tell a department you will take away what they have left from their budget at the end of the year, they'll spend it all. That's not how we encourage thrift."

Commissioner G. William Caddell, R-Walled Lake, said the balance was not all surplus tax.

Some of the funds leading to the surplus came from fees, investments by the treasurer and adjustments, said Caddell, who is chairman of the board's finance committee.

Area code hearing set

A public hearing on plans to split the 313 telephone area code is scheduled 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 7, in the Livonia Civic Center Library Auditorium, 32777 Five Mile.

A preliminary plan would split the area into north and south regions.

Detroit, the Grosse Pointes, Ann Arbor and Monroe would remain in the 313 area code. Other communities, including Farmington, Mount Clemens, Flint, Lapeer, Port Huron and Sandusky would receive a new area code.

Telephone rates wouldn't change, according to Michigan Bell. Calls that are local today would remain local after the split.

The split is necessary, Bell officials said, because the 313 area code is running out of available telephone numbers.

An additional meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Wednesday, April 8, at the Novi Civic Center, 45175 W. 10 Mile.

Those unable to attend either meeting can comment by calling 1-800-831-8989.

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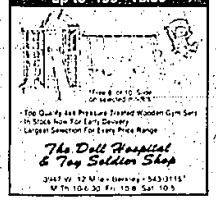
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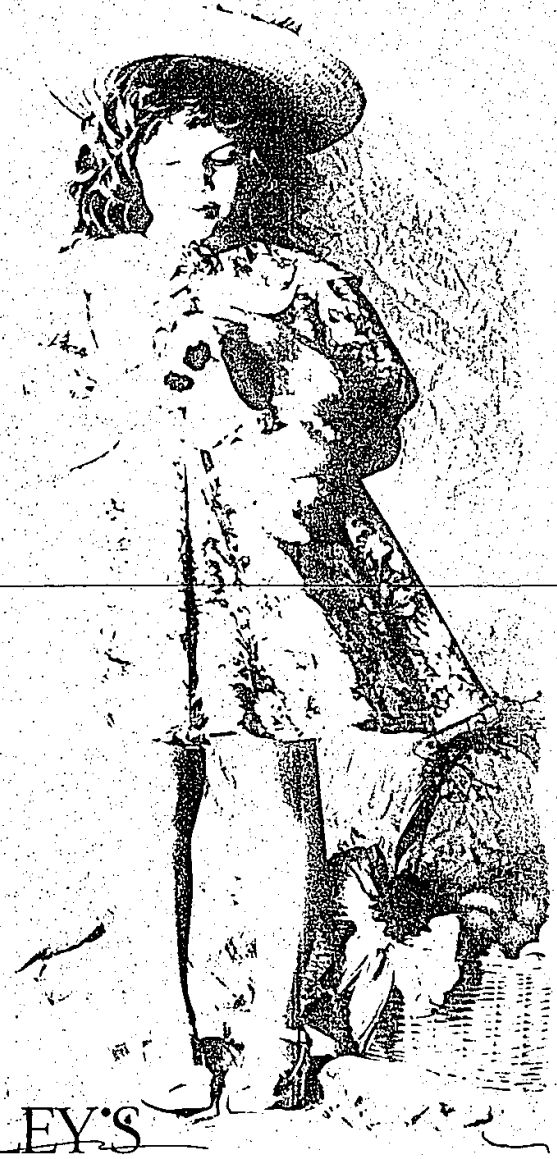

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