

Saying goodbye

Murphy seeks no fanfare

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Daniel T. Murphy would like to retire as Oakland County executive the same way he held the office: With dignity and little fanfare.

"Fat chance."

Murphy has been Oakland's only chief since Oakland went to the county executive form of government in the early 1970s. He was elected in 1974 and re-elected four times.

Murphy's tenure, most would agree, has been characterized by efficiency, stability and the absence of major scandal. As a person, Murphy has been unpretentious and accessible — even his home phone number is listed.

Murphy, who turns 60 in August, is not seeking re-election and, in characteristic fashion, wants little fuss when he leaves office. "I didn't even want a party," said fellow Republican and former county chairman Roy Rewold. "He almost wants to just fade away."

That, simply, won't do, said Rewold who suggests that — as a minimum taken of esteem — Oakland require the county executive building after Dan Murphy. "That would be a good starting point," said Rewold, a Rochester Hills businessman who worked closely with Murphy for nine years, first as county commissioner, then GOP caucus chairman and finally as county chairman.

Stroke leaves mark

Rewold and other admirers are sympathetic to the executive's request for a quiet, if not invisible, exit. Murphy suffered a stroke in January and, after threatening to force an early retirement, left him partially disabled.

His gait, once strong and purposeful, is uncertain. His speech, once clear and resolute, now falters. But that's no reason to ignore the passing from office of a true friend and faithful public servant, according to people like Rewold and other supporters.

Murphy may well have received



Daniel Murphy
county executive

some kind of tribute over the week-end on Mackinac Island during the annual Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce conference. That's one time of the year movers and shakers like Murphy, Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara and others get together on a somewhat friendly basis.

It's hard to imagine public officials like Young and McNamara — who understand the rigors of public life — not honoring Murphy, in public or otherwise.

Murphy has agreed to one — and only one — commemorative dinner, according to press secretary Susan Singer Mitchell. That will be Sept. 23 at the Novi Hilton Hotel, "the largest seating capacity we could find in Oakland County."

People had to talk Murphy into a farewell party, Mitchell said. "We told him he had to do it, he couldn't just walk away."

As might be expected, the Dan Murphy farewell dinner committee includes Gov. John Engler, Mayor Young, McNamara and others, Mitchell said.

The outpouring of affection is more than routine, according to Pat Nowak, the executive's longtime friend and former deputy who is now director of the Michigan Department of Transportation.

"People really love him," said Nowak, who classified Murphy as a kind of father figure in county government.

Loyal to employees

Perhaps the best example of how Murphy's style of government is different is his approach to discipline. "I don't believe in hanging somebody just because he or she has done something wrong," he once said in an interview. "When somebody does something wrong, we correct it and get back to business."

Murphy once told county commissioners he'd rather talk to errant employees — even those who admitted stealing — rather than fire or prosecute them, as long as they paid the money back.

That approach was criticized by the Oakland County sheriff, but eventually condoned by the office of the Michigan Attorney General.

That was in 1989-90 at the height of a feud between Murphy and Sheriff John F. Nichols over control of the executive's public safety division. Nichols charged mismanagement within the public safety division, including a failure to act on complaints of larceny.

The AG's office undoubtedly calmed the broiling political waters by saying private citizens and public figures should report crimes, but it's not a violation of state law not to do so.

"One of Dan Murphy's biggest faults," said county commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick, D-Southfield, "is loyalty. Murphy believes he appoints good people and then he stands by them... no matter what."

Sometimes he gets embarrassed.

Pernick, who has himself differed with Murphy, is in a position to know. He was elected to the county board in 1968 — when Murphy was still on the County Board of Auditors — and has worked with or against him since.

Pernick is also one of the co-chairmen for Murphy's farewell dinner in September.

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