

# Decisions at hand for voters in OCC board race

**BY TIM RICHARD**  
STAFF WRITER

To candidates, it has been the hottest Oakland Community College race in three decades. Today's voter turnout will show how excited the public is about the politics of the past six months. While voters pick local school board candidates, they also will elect two trustees to the OCC board from a field of nine candidates.

Voter interest has varied in the last 14 years from a high of 99,714 in 1982 to a low of 42,401 in 1984. Last year's property tax special election drew 76,768 to the polls.

Chief topic of conversation has been last fall's firing of Chancellor Sandra Ritter of Waterford led that charge. A slate of Jeanne Towar, a publishing executive from Royal Oak, and retired

OCC faculty member John Wanger of Beverly Hills has made Ritter and the firing their chief issue.

James Doyon, a former Oakland County commissioner from Huntington Woods, has avoided taking sides, positioning himself as a "peacemaker." Dr. Mark Sullivan, a dentist who lives in Oakland Township, and Lawrence D. Kohl, an attorney who lives in Farmington Hills,

have deplored the damage to OCC's image.

Less has been heard from Ellen Ferguson, a teacher and coach who lives in Bloomfield Hills and who confessed to being sorry she ran; Marguerite Fitzsimmons Walker II, a Royal Oak attorney who started out with elaborate research and then discontinued appearance; and Jan Mack, a former student from Waterford who failed to

make any of the three public forums and didn't have a campaign picture.

Politically, here is the lineup: Supporting Towar and Wanger are a bipartisan team led by the Republican county executive, a present and past GOP county chair, a past Democratic chair and lawmakers from both parties.

Although members of OCCFA, the faculty union, voted

against making an endorsement, an informal group of activists in the MEA affiliate has actively supported Ritter, a member of MEA. Also supporting her is David Wakefield, board president, who is retiring as trustee.

Kohl picked up endorsements from some Democratic friends.

Polls will be open until 8 p.m. Two winners will serve six-year terms without pay.

# Court to oversee proceeds of Beckwith-Evans auction

**BY LAURIE HEMPHREY**  
STAFF WRITER

Wendy Johnson of Bloomfield Township left a deposit with Beckwith-Evans for carpeting, but when she called back to add the stairs to her order, she was told she would have to make a second deposit. That's when she became concerned. Eventually, further calls to the troubled company went unanswered.

In the aftermath of consumer complaints, the Oakland County prosecuting attorney and the attorney for Beckwith-Evans both have responded to the complaints, saying their actions are for the good of the public.

According to Chief Assistant Prosecutor Lawrence Bunting, the prosecutor's office logged at least 15 calls last week from Oakland County residents who

together had left more than \$12,000 at the carpet store as a deposit. Yet, the carpeting was never delivered and the money was never returned before the company closed.

Since then, the list of potential victims has grown to 76 with losses totaling \$62,137. "And we expect more people to be calling," Bunting said. "If anyone has concerns about this, they should call (810) 858-1055."

Harvey Babcock, the Farmington Hills-based attorney for Beckwith-Evans, suggests that people who have made a deposit and not received their carpeting contact the court assignee: Stan Bershad, Assignee for the Benefit of Creditors, 4000 Town Center, Suite 1200, Southfield, 48075.

He will send them the paper-

work to get their carpeting or their money, Babcock said.

Bunting suspects the initial calls resulted from carpet buyers who had seen a Beckwith-Evans notice of auction in a publication. The carpet company closed on April 26, one day after newspapering under the name of Interior Management Group, Inc., said the prosecutor's office in a press release.

Babcock denies that Beckwith-Evans incorporated under a new name, calling that announcement "absolutely incorrect."

The carpet company scheduled an auction of its assets for June 4. County Prosecutor Richard Thompson obtained an Oakland County Circuit Court injunction, stopping the auction and enjoining Beckwith-Evans from disposing of assets. The injunction was later dissolved, allowing Beckwith-Evans to proceed with the auction. Sale proceeds will be under court control.

"We are taking these steps to try to insure that the citizens of Oakland County are protected, and have an opportunity to have their money returned, before this business and its assets disappear," Thompson said.

Babcock said the injunction actually could have hurt those who paid the deposit and received nothing in return. "Had the injunction stuck, Beckwith-Evans would have been evicted and those people would have gotten nothing, Beckwith-Evans, and their carpet, would be out in the middle of Maple Road."

"I understand and sympathize with their position," said Babcock about the people who paid

the deposit. "But nobody cheated anybody. Nobody took the money with the intent to defraud them. And our goal is to raise as much money as we can get to get the carpeting to everyone who paid, or to get their money back to them. We want to make everyone happy."

Babcock admitted, however, that there is no guarantee everyone will recoup everything they lost. "But aside from giving people their money back, we're trying to work out a deal with another carpet company to deliver their carpet." Because the plan has not been authorized by the court, Babcock would not release the name of that carpet company.

The prosecutor's office also claims Beckwith-Evans was doing business as Floorscapes and Prosource Wholesale Floor Covering. Babcock admits the agents of Beckwith-Evans do have an interior decorating business but that business has "nothing to do with Beckwith-Evans."

Wendy Johnson is one of 76 people who called the prosecutor's office to tell their carpeting story. She handed over a \$400 deposit to the manager of Beckwith-Evans' Troy store, at 15 Mile and Livernois, last April. The total purchase price was approximately \$800.

"It was half the price of the carpeting. That seemed unusual that they would require that much money down, but that is what they wanted," she said.

After leaving the deposit, she called the manager a number of times to make sure everything

was running smoothly. "They came out right away to measure. And when I called them to find out if the carpeting was in stock, they said, 'Your carpet is in stock,'" she said. "Then when I called a couple days later, the manager wouldn't even take my calls."

Two days before the store closed for good, Johnson called to speak with the manager again but was directed to a salesperson. "I wanted to add the stairs to my order," she said. "And the salesperson told me they would need another deposit. That is what got me suspicious."

She called the store again two days later only to find no answer. "It would just ring and ring. Then I drove up to the store, and saw the letter," she said.

The letter said Beckwith-Evans had closed temporarily.

She called other Beckwith-Evans stores, one in Westland and one in Redford Township. The voice message referred her to the Troy store, where she had originally bought the carpet.

As Troy city attorney, Peter Letzmann has no authority to pursue Beckwith-Evans, so he referred callers to the Consumer Fraud Division of Oakland County.

"My concern is I want to try and help Troy residents as best I can," he said. "Orders and deposits were taken right up to the point of closing their doors."

Babcock reasoned that Beckwith-Evans employees were not privy to the principal's decision to close, and were doing business as usual. "They did not know

that they were going to close," said Babcock, who admitted the stores were having problems.

"We could not get the carpeting (from the carpeting warehouses)," Beckwith-Evans marked its 50th anniversary so how could it fail now? "They just couldn't make it," said Babcock. "They just ran out of money."

That is dismaying to Johnson, a single mother of two young children. "I'm just hoping to get my \$400 back. I work very hard, for my money, and I just want it back."

Babcock said it could take up to eight months to distribute the money.

An Oakland County Circuit Court assignee could begin distributing money to creditors and debtors this fall, following a June 11 auction. A June 6 court order permits the company to hold the auction, but stipulates all proceeds will be deposited into a separate interest-bearing account under the jurisdiction of the court.

"We are liquidating everything, the carpeting, the trucks, the equipment, the racks, the samples... to the bare walls," said Babcock.

Aside from creditors' attorneys, the city of Troy may contend for funds from the company's assets. Beckwith-Evans owes more than \$4,000 in 1996 property taxes, according to the city treasurer's office.

"The principals of Beckwith-Evans have tremendous personal liabilities... in the hundreds of thousands," said Babcock. "They have tremendous liabilities... for taxes alone."

## AAUW seeks book donations

The Birmingham Branch of the American Association of University Women is collecting book donations for its 69th annual book sale in September.


Donation sites are at: Dammon's, 20600 Southfield Road, Southfield; Damman's, 6550 Telegraph, at Maple; Bloomfield Hills; Farmer Jack locations at 555 Adams Road Birmingham, 3600 West Maple at Lahser, Bloomfield Township, and Crooks and South Boulevard in Auburn Hills; Hollywood Market locations at 3570 West Maple, Troy, and 603 south

Opdyke, Auburn Hills; Kroger locations at 725 East Maple, Hunter, Birmingham, and 3200 East South Boulevard, Bloomfield Hills; YMCA, 500 East Lincoln, Birmingham; Vic's Fruit Market, 31201 Southfield at 13 Mile Road, Beverly Hills.

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