

Just re-elected, board chief riles fellow Republicans

BY PAT MURPHY

STAFF REPORTER

Before being sworn in to his third consecutive term as chair of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, John P. McCulloch kicked off something of a controversy.

Tuesday, during the county board's first meeting of 1998, McCulloch gave a five-minute talk during which he said Oakland should explore the possibility of changing the basic form of county government.

McCulloch listed exploring the possibility of adopting the so-called Charter form of government — which would require a charter commission and a vote of the people — as one of 10 issues that "will be at the forefront in 1998."

The idea isn't new. But county executive L. Brooks Patterson — as well as a number of county commissioners — were miffed because McCulloch hadn't mentioned it to them before the meeting.

"He's not talking about something as minor as changing a light bulb," said deputy executive Kenneth Rogers. "On something that major (changing the structure of county government), I would have thought he (McCulloch) would have communicated with the county executive — a fellow Republican."



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John P. McCulloch
County board chair

McCulloch would have communicated with the county executive — a fellow Republican.

Patterson didn't attend Tuesday's meeting. He had been out of the office for two days with what aides described as flu-like symptoms. But Rogers made it clear the executive was irritated.

"He (McCulloch) didn't even communicate with most of his fellow commissioners," said Rogers.

McCulloch said privately that he didn't intend to surprise the executive or anybody else. "I just wanted to get the issue out in the open," he said. "Even Mr.

Patterson has talked about the idea before. I just thought it's time to discuss the matter publicly."

There is no standard form of charter county government, according to commissioner Sue Ann Douglas, R-Rochester, who said she has studied the charter form of government for several years. "The end result is generally dependent on the charter commission elected to draft it," she said.

But some charter counties have done away with some elected offices — such as drain commissioner — by making them

appointed positions. Some advocates insist it can lead to more efficient government. But others, including Douglas, have doubts.

"I think the character and quality of the elected officials is more important than the form of government," she said. "I'm willing to look at the idea, but right now, I'm not enthusiastic."

Commissioner Lawrence A. Obrecht, R-Lake Orion, said the idea of a charter government merits discussion. "But I was upset about being caught off guard," he said. "I would like to have had some advanced notice."

Commissioner Dan Devine Jr., R-Bloomfield Hills, said he believes any controversy will quickly fade away. It might have been prudent for Devine to advise his colleagues, he said. "But I don't think that's a major problem. It doesn't matter to me

how the idea came up."

Besides re-electing McCulloch chair, the board elected commissioner Kay Schmid, R-Nowi, as vice chair.

The board also elected the chairs and vice chairs of standing committees. They are:

■ Finance committee: Chair Sue Ann Douglas, R-Rochester, and vice chairs Donald W. Jensen, R-Birmingham, and Jeff Kingzett, D-Pontiac/Auburn Hills.

■ General Government committee: Chair Nancy Dingeldey, R-Wixom/West Bloomfield, and vice chairs John P. Garfield, R-Rochester Hills, and Ruel E. McPherson, D-Hazel Park.

■ Planning and Building committee: Chair Charles E. Palmer,

R-Clawson/Troy, and vice chairs Donna R. Hunkton, R-Clarkston, and Eugene Kaczmar, D-Madison Heights.

■ Public Services committee: Chair David L. Moffitt, R-Farmington Hills, and vice chairs Frank H. Millard, R-Clarkston, and Gilda Z. Jacobs, D-Huntington Woods.

■ Personnel committee: Chair Thomas A. Law, R-West Bloomfield, and vice chairs Dan Devine Jr., R-Bloomfield Hills, and Joanne Holbert, D-Pontiac.

■ Strategic Planning committee: Chair Dennis N. Powers, R-Highland, and vice chairs Ruth Johnson, R-Holly, and Eric Coleman, D-Southfield.

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ing those that opted out of SMART and are not part of the system — will receive comparable increases in their municipal credits, according to Dirks.

As for the \$4 million SMART will receive for operational expenses, Dirks said planners will be very careful. "We can use the money to expand service or to reduce the deficit," he said. "Or we can use the additional money for both."

Dirks said planners are expected to make recommendations to the SMART board of directors, probably at its February meeting.

SMART is obviously pleased at the prospect of getting more money, Dirks said. But planners have to be cautious, he said, the funding may be reduced next year.

"We have to be careful about expanding services that might have to be cut back if the funding isn't there next year," said James O'Shea, SMART director of finance.

While \$4 million may not seem like a lot of money, particularly when spread over the tri-county

service area, said Matthew M. Wirgau, one of two Oakland County appointees to the SMART board of directors. The other is deputy county executive Kenneth Rogers.

But SMART can make that money go a long way, said Wirgau, who is board chair. "We can leverage a little money and make significant changes in community service," he said. It takes relatively little money to change or expand an existing route.

Wirgau, a Bloomfield Township resident, said he is extremely pleased with the changes SMART has made in 1995 when it faced a \$20 million deficit.

SMART has reduced the deficit to around \$7 million, he said, and ridership is up to nearly 200,000 riders weekly.

Many of those new riders, he said, are people who live in Detroit and work in Oakland County.

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