

# County judges grant formation of grand jury

BY NICOLE STAFFORD  
STAFF WRITER

If a grand jury is formed as planned in Oakland County, one of the cases it investigates may be the 1997 hit-and-run death of Bloomfield Township resident Priscilla Anne Ricketts.

Ricketts was 64 when she died from injuries suffered in a hit-and-run incident while loading groceries into the trunk of her car in a Troy parking lot in March of that year. Although the investigation has been ongoing, police have been unable to crack the case.

However, the police department may submit the case for a grand jury investigation under Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcey, according to Troy

Acting Chief of Police Charles Craft.

Oakland County's prosecutor announced Friday that Oakland County Circuit Court judges had granted his request to empanel a Citizen's Grand Jury to investigate unsolved homicides and organized drug trafficking in the county.

The grand jury body, which is comprised of 17 jurors and authorized for six months, is considered a powerful tool in solving tough cases, partly because prosecutors can offer immunity to witnesses who are either reluctant or unwilling to reveal information.

"Basically, Oakland County has had four grand juries and the results have been very, very good," Circuit Judge Edward Sosnick, chief judge of the Oak-

land Circuit Court, said of the decision to approve Gorcey's request.

Gorcey must now convince the Oakland County Board of Commissioners to provide \$75,000 in funding for the jury — which should be easy, given the success of past grand jury investigations, said County Commissioner Ruth Johnson.

"It's really an excellent tool for getting people off the streets that are a threat to society," she said. "Overall, I think the board is going to be very supportive."

Gorcey plans to submit the funding request to commissioners Feb. 26, and a grand jury could be in place by mid-March, according to Chief Deputy Prosecutor John N. O'Brien II.

However, O'Brien could not offer any

information about the number of cases that Gorcey hopes to probe or whether the prosecutor had any particular cases in mind because of secrecy requirements under the Grand Jury statute.

"I can tell you that there are cases that have been submitted to the office from law enforcement departments," he said. "But we can never talk about the cases."

Local police departments are taking stock of their unsolved cases and evaluating them for submission.

Besides the Ricketts case, Troy police are looking at two unsolved murder cases, including the 1978 murder of Gayle Ardith Webster.

Farmington Hills Police Chief Bill Dwyer said he had already submitted sev-

eral unsolved cases, including at least one drug trafficking case for consideration. "There's a very great need for a grand jury in Oakland County," he said. "They work very well in major drug trafficking cases."

Also pleased with the possibility that investigators might receive some extra help cases was Southfield Police Chief Joseph Thomas.

At least two unsolved homicide cases — the 1993 stabbing death of Ebony Wright and the 1995 murder of Deborah Kennedy — would be submitted, he said.

"In some of these cases...we can almost say who did them and how they were done...There are a couple of cases where we know that witnesses misled us," Thomas said.

'Just about every other month, it seems like something new's coming about.'

— Norma, waitress at R&J's Coffee Shop.

## Royal Oak turning the corner again

BY SALLY TATO  
STAFF WRITER

People who know Pat Patterson know where to find him after the sun rises. The grey-haired vintage Royal Oaker parks himself on a stool at R&J Coffee Shop most mornings for breakfast.

Just a half cup of the dark stuff sat in front of Patterson last week as he spent the early part of his day jabbing with the other regulars at the box-sized joint on Fourth Street in downtown Royal Oak.

Waitresses at R&J's joke that Patterson's probably been coming there for breakfast since it opened in 1952.

A lot of changes have happened at the restaurant since then. It keeps late hours now, until 4 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights and lures people in with paintings of shadows of couples sharing cups of coffee and conversation all around the outside of the place.

Patterson has seen more changes than that in his home town. The man, who won't divulge his age but says he was born in 1926, doesn't understand all the fuss about downtown Royal Oak. He sees the town as a mass of antique shops and restaurants.

The growth makes life more complicated for the man. "The people are a little tougher. Driving gets damn tough," Patterson said. "Why do people flock here?"

They flock for what Patterson likes in the town: mom and pop-owned shops where customers are called by their first names. And they flock for what he might not like as well: national coffee house chains, restaurants that feature live entertainment and a wide range of ethnic foods, galleries, an artsy movie theater, and shops full of gifts and gadgets and decorating goodies — all stops on a metro Detroit media trolley tour hosted by the Royal Oak Chamber of Commerce last week.

The four-hour tour aimed a spotlight at the city, from its stores and restaurants and theaters downtown to historic Shrine of the Little Flower church and homes and Beaumont Hospital. It was a chance to capture all that the city, specifically downtown, had become, and everything that survived the changes.

Michael Andrezjak calls the time when new met old downtown the renaissance of Royal Oak. It started almost 20 years ago, as shops like Decades, a store



Local living: (Above) Charles Boggs, a 39 year resident of Royal Oak, stands in front of the Main Professional building at W. Fourth and Main. He lives upstairs. (Below) Spotted outside the window of trolley driver Tyrone Wright, is construction of new condominiums on Main.

that carries television and movie collectibles and merchandise, moved from booths in the historic Farmer's Market to stores in town.

Andrezjak, mayor pro-tem in the community, said the businesses that survived turnaround were the ones that changed with the times. "The business owners or entrepreneurs that are willing to evolve with their business are the successful ones," he said.

Holiday Market, on the outskirts of town on Main Street, is a perfect example. Store director John Pardington said the market has expanded seven times to meet changing customer needs since it opened in 1969. The biggest changes occurred seven years ago under his guidance when the store expanded 5,000-square-feet, added a complete bakery,

doubled its deli department, tripled its produce section, added ready-made meals, specialty foods, a more sophisticated wine selection and a 40-foot seafood counter.

"I tell the staff here that a store is like a living creature. You have to constantly groom it. You have to constantly take care of it because if you don't, it's gonna die," Pardington said.

Walk down a block of Royal Oak's two main drags, Washington or Main, and there's proof of Par-



ington's theory. A strip of Washington, for example, touts businesses that have survived the renaissance and others that fill storefronts that didn't. Repeat the Best, a record store that's coveted the corner of Washington and Sixth for 10 years is neighbors with Rare Old Prints, which borders the new Patti Smith location, which sits next to the two-month old Mail Boxes Etc. store.

Local residents fill the downtown during the day, shopping at the stores, running their errands at the markets; it's the visitors who live outside the south Oakland County city who fill its streets at night, Andrezjak said. A booming nightlife has popped up in downtown Royal Oak in the last decade. Restaurants like Mongolian Barbecue, Tom's Oyster Bar and Pronto!

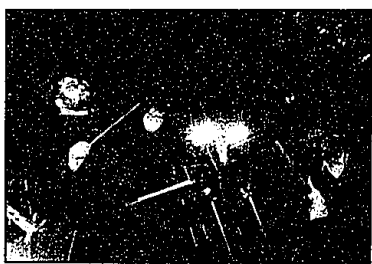
keep people fed; while others entertain them: pool hall and music venue Fifth Avenue or newly opened magic-themed restaurant Illusions, to name a pair.

City planning director Richard Beltz said the success of the downtown is being taken into consideration as officials develop the city's first master plan in 30 years. A balance of new housing, including a condominium complex just south of the downtown drags, and business development will keep the downtown successful. A 200-room hotel is also planned near the Woodward and I-696 intersection.

"I think it's important you have people downtown. Housing is one way you bring people downtown," Beltz said.

Back at R&J's, waitress Norma can vouch for the hungry people who fill the offices during the day and grab a quick bite to eat during lunch. The late weekend hours draw a crowd looking for cappuccinos.

The changes, says Norma, an antiques buff, keep things shaking in town. "Just about every other month, it seems like something new's coming about," she said.



Behind the scenes: Pit conductor Stan Harr directs at the Baldwin Theatre in Royal Oak.

## Tornado drill bill seeks to educate

BY TIM RICHARD  
STAFF WRITER

School kids will get two tornado alert drills a year if Rep. Jerry Law's bill flies through the Legislature as easily as it flew through the House Education Committee.

"Unless you put it in the code, each district has its own priorities. The only way you can do it is to require it," said Law, R-Plymouth, when a committee member asked why there should be a law requiring tornado drills.

He was backed during a Feb. 4 hearing by Paul Gross, a meteorologist from Farmington Hills with WDIV, who told of an incident last September at Spring Lake junior and senior high schools.

"Teachers mistook a tornado warning for a fire alarm and took the students outside," said Gross. "However, not all teachers went outside; some ignored the warning altogether and continued to teach classes. This incident is inexcusable and preventable."

"It's impossible," said Law, "for Paul to travel to all 500 school boards and convince them to do this."

The state Fire Prevention Code requires 10 fire drills per year in all schools, including colleges and universities. Law's bill would amend it to require at least two tornado drills and eight fire drills.

The committee reported it out on a 17-0 vote. It will be on the House calendar this week.

"Most communities have bought tornado sirens, but schools are a missing part of the protection," said Law.

Panel members wanted to know: Who would train school administrators and who would pay for the training? Asked Rep. Penny Crissman, R-Rochester: "How do they know it's a tornado siren? People are getting lackadaisical about sirens."

"The Michigan Committee for Severe Weather Awareness has prepared a packet for every building in the state, at no cost to the schools," said Gross, adding that insurance companies played a major role.

"Some schools wait for a phone call (warning of an approaching storm or tornado). They need to be ready to act at a moment's notice,"

Asked by Rep. Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, for a short course in school safety, Gross replied: "Don't go to rooms with exterior windows, such as cafeterias, gyms and auditoriums. Use interior hallways."

## New web site puts Oakland job seekers on Net

BY NICOLE STAFFORD  
STAFF WRITER

Finding and filling jobs in Oakland County has come under a new spotlight — the Internet.

As part of integrating employment services formerly handled by the Michigan Employment Security Agency (MESA) into the Balance of Oakland County Michigan Workforce Agency (MWA), the county Feb. 4 officially launched an employment web site.

Located within the larger, national web site America's Talent Bank, the county site enables employers and job seekers from within the area and across the country to target Oakland County in their Internet searches.

The site will primarily hold the resumes of job seekers from Oakland County, but will also enable companies to post openings. Currently, about 40,000 resumes are listed on the site.

"I used it last night," said professional job recruiter Jodi Freeman, of Staff Pro in Southfield. Within three days of the site's launch, Freeman was able to look over 100 resumes, set up 10 screening interviews and post 105 jobs.

"It's part of the wave (in recruiting and job searches)," Freeman said. "But it can't be your only tool."

For county job seekers, it isn't the only tool. Prior to Feb. 4, Michigan residents who filed for unemployment and needed help finding a job worked with MESA.

Gov. John Engler reorganized MESA in an executive order signed last August, decentralizing job search services and placing them under the purview of local government.

The change means that county residents, who file for unemployment insurance, must stop by one of seven county career centers to be eligible for benefits.

The sites are currently located in Troy, Farmdale, Holly, Highland, Oak Park, Southfield and Walled Lake. MWA serves all of Oakland County except the cities of Auburn Hills, Farmdale and the townships of Independence, Orion, Waterford and White Lake.

However, anyone, even those who are employed, are eligible to use of the career centers' free resources. A Michigan Jobs Commission grant of \$2 million is funding the takeover of employment services in Oakland County.

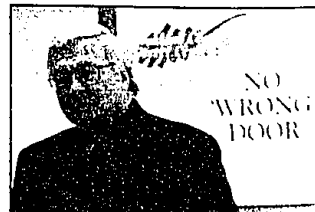
Under the new system, county unemployment claimants will also be able to work with career center staff to draft a resume, which will then be placed in the county web site. Federal law requires unemployment claimants to submit a resume for job placement.

Most importantly, though, residents who have been laid-off and who applied for unemployment benefits will become familiar with one of the county's career centers and be encouraged to return.

By requiring unemployment claimants to draft and hand over their resumes at the site, many individuals will also get their first taste of using computers to find a job.

"Computer-savvy claimants will receive assistance from qualified staff at these centers, which provide other workforce development services, like occupational classroom training, for those who need additional help to re-enter the work force," said County Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

Vivian Bee, of Troy, visited the county's Troy Career Center when she found herself unemployed last year. Staff helped her do a resume and search



New site: Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson speaks about the new county employment web site.

for a job on the Internet, she said.

She eventually landed a job through the Internet. "Let's just say it works a whole lot better than going to (a print shop) and copying your resumes."

The Balance of Oakland County Michigan Workforce Agency can be accessed at <http://www.michworks.org>