

Commission a key first step for political hopefuls

When voters go to the polls Tuesday, many will pick candidates for what is often considered the "invisible" level of government — the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

It's considered invisible, in part because county government is often overshadowed by events or politics in Washington or Lansing.

Commissioner Sus Ann Douglas, R-Rochester, expressed it this way: "Voters are more likely to know their mayor or city council member than their county commissioner. We're an important level of government, but not the most visible."

In the overall scheme of government, the county board is at or near the very bottom of public awareness, said Douglas, who was on the Rochester City Council prior to being elected to the county board.

But that's starting to change — at least in political circles — as the Oakland County Board of Commissioners gains importance and recognition as a training ground and possible springboard for bigger and better things.

Consider this:

Two state representatives — Nancy Quarles of Southfield and Hubert Price of Pontiac — went directly from the county board to the state legislature.

"Being a commissioner prepared me for the legislature," said Quarles. "I learned about government, and I built bridges with people (in the county executive's office, for example) who helped me understand issues and how they related to my constituents and the county."

Three current or former county commissioners — Gilda Jacobs, D-Huntington Woods, Ruth Johnson, R-Holly, and John Pappageorge, R-Troy, — are currently seeking their respective party's nomination for state representative.

The experience — and political exposure — each received at the county level is considered important for their political aspirations.

Three former commissioners went on to become judges. They are Oakland Circuit Judge John J. McDonald of Farmington Hills and district judges Ralph H. Nelson of Rochester Hills and Den-

nis Powers of Highland.

Another judicial hopeful — Richard D. Kuhn, Jr., of Waterford — touts his experience on the board of commissioners in his campaign for the Oakland Circuit Court against Steve Kaplan of West Bloomfield and Colleen O'Brien of Rochester Hills.

"Serving at the township or city level is also good experience," said McDonald. "But a county commission district is generally larger, and it provides name recognition to more people."

Former commissioner Walter Moore is mayor of Pontiac.

William "Doc" Caddell, a former commissioner from Walled Lake, is currently deputy to the Oakland County Clerk — with aspirations of running for the top job when Lynn D. Allen retires.

Former commissioner Pat Nowak became deputy county executive after being a commissioner from Bloomfield Hills and subsequently became director of the Michigan Department of Transportation.

Two county commissioners — Richard G. Skarritt of Milford and Larry P. Crake of Waterford — are now commissioners on the Road Commission for Oakland County.

"It (the county board) is a great training ground," said commissioner Thomas A. Law, R-West Bloomfield. "Some of the things we deal with are similar to what they (legislators) do at the state level. But at the state level, there's more money involved."

Training and experience are more important with term limits, said Law. Term limits not only creates more vacancies in the state legislature, it necessitates more knowledgeable candidates who can hit the ground running when they get to Lansing.

"Now state representatives don't have the luxury of taking a year or two to get their feet wet," he said, referring to the fact they are limited to a maximum of six consecutive years. "Voters realize some experience in government enables a candidate to be more effective sooner."

Douglas agrees being on the

board is good training. "But it's not necessarily the political spring board people think it is," she insisted. "For one thing, we're not legislators. We don't pass laws."

"Our biggest responsibility is reviewing and approving the annual budget," she said. That doesn't automatically translate into bigger and better things, Douglas said.

In doing the budget, however, commissioners gain expertise in a variety of areas such as criminal justice, courts, roads, mental health and drains — expertise that looks good on a resume or in campaign literature.

Board members are elected on a partisan basis, notes commissioner Donald W. Jensen, R-Birmingham. "Running as a Republican or Democrat helps somebody begin to understand the party system and how it works in government."

"Being a commissioner is an excellent way to learn about the inner workings of government," said commissioner Shelley R. Taub, R-Bloomfield Hills. "But it's also an important job in itself."

The Oakland County Board of Commissioners is composed of 25 commissioners elected to two-year terms.

The job is considered part time, with commissioners expected to attend board meetings twice a month and periodic committee meetings.

Some commissioners have additional responsibilities such as serving on the Community Mental Health Board, which by next year is expected to be an autonomous authority.

Commissioners are paid \$25,111 annually and they are entitled to the same fringe benefits available to other county employees — including life insurance, health care (including dental and optical) and retirement benefits.

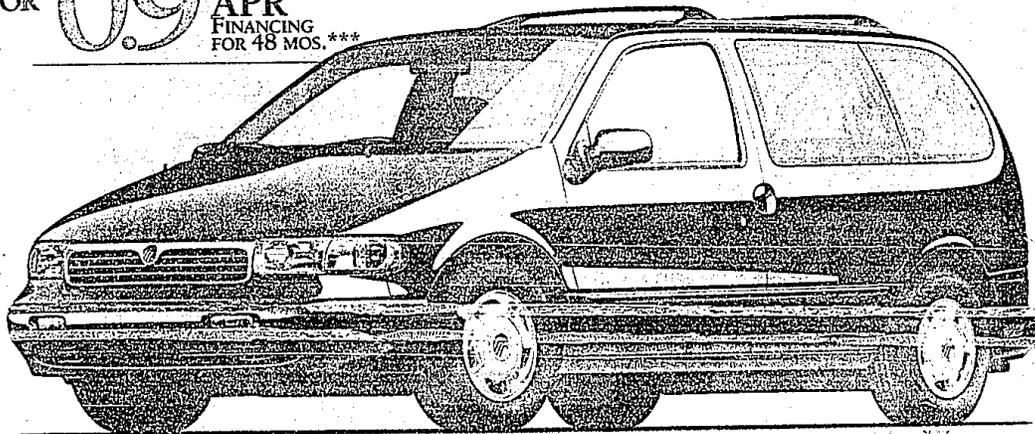
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