

DELOS HAMLIN: COUNTIES IN THE JET AGE

By TIM RICHARD
Sunday Editor

Among political thinkers, county government is considered an antiquated relic, tied up by old laws and a rustic, haphazard structure, with no head and a malnourished, grotesque body.

Yet Oakland County has had considerable success in tackling problems at that level of government, and later this month hundreds of people will pay tribute to the man they consider most responsible for that success.

Delos Hamlin, 63, has been chairman of the Oakland County Board of Supervisors since 1956 and has been on the board itself for fully 25 years, which is the reason for the testimonial dinner.

HE'S A TALL, slender, gentle sort of man whose laugh wrinkles don't show up in his formal portrait. He looks like he might be a country banker or parson rather than a power in politics.

Powerful? He resents the word. He prefers terms like "cooperation," "personal friendship," "communication." His formal education stopped after graduation from Clare High School, and his political education spans 38 practical years in City of Farmington and Oakland County government—and yet he thinks along the lines of the "behavioral" political scientists even though he's unfamiliar with their jargon.

Hamlin came to Farmington when he was 10, worked in a meat market and sold real estate. In 1930, at the age of 25, he was first elected to the Farmington City Commission, served as mayor from 1939-49, and was appointed by the commission to the County Board in 1942. The County Board's practice was to rotate chairmen every year or two, and Hamlin got that job on April 10, 1956. But for reasons explained later, he stayed in the post and is now in his 12th year. His part of all the leadership groups in Farmington—the Presbyterian Church, the Elks, the F. & A.M., the Exchange Club, the Republican Party. After giving up the meat market business, he devoted full time to real estate, now owns a bowling alley and restaurant in Farmington, a 1,000 acre farm with a lake near Clare, and 1,800 acres of timber and pasture land, also near Clare.

Auto County

A DISTINGUISHED career? Yes, but not extraordinary. Yet what is extraordinary is his ability to get things done with an antiquated system of government—a system which outside visitors study with amazement.

Oakland County isn't like any other county with a large urban area. In the typical city like Detroit, Hamlin explains, services are geared to high-density settlement and public transportation. In Oakland County, the settlement has been low density and geared to the private automobile. County government has undertaken tasks—such as water and sewerage planning—which typically fall to home rule cities.

To do the job, the Board of Supervisors has had to set up one special commission after another. Ten years ago, Hamlin freely admits, he had serious qualms about the structure. Since then, he has decided that "people are more important than government" and that problems could be solved with the old-fashioned structure, although a modern home rule charter is still desirable.

Hamlin has also been a moving force for the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (COG), which includes counties, cities, townships, villages, school and college districts in six counties. He has not only worked but has thought about them, too.

So we asked him one cold morning to stop into the newspaper's Farmington office before driving up to Pontiac for the day, and just chat about things.

Q. Why has Oakland County had such a good experience, in your opinion, with such an inadequate structure? What makes this "cooperative attitude" possible?

HAMLIN: "Well, I think Oakland County has been very fortunate that it has above-average citizenry. I believe that our cities and townships—all our municipalities—are governed better than average."

"This flows up to the county government eventually. 'But the key reason Oakland County has been able to move ahead in this inter-governmental cooperative effort is that large city that dominates the entire county. We haven't had any jealousy and friction between the smaller communities versus the city, which happens in so many areas. 'People thought many years ago that our small communities were a handicap, but actually they've turned out to be an asset for the county."

"I've heard people say 'it's too bad the whole south end wasn't incorporated as one big city because you're duplicating police chiefs and managers and all that.' On paper it looks like there's economy in big government, but in practice it doesn't work out that way."

"Today, all the cities that are in financial trouble are your larger cities. Why that's true I don't know, other than that the larger you get, the more you get away from the people, the more the bureaucracy is built up—I don't know, it just happens that way."

For COG

Q. The State Supreme Court records are pretty heavy with cases of central government involvement in fights with the county in this case being other cities and townships—Saginaw, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, ...

HAMLIN: "It's a natural thing that people who have responsibility in a community feel somewhat competitive with their neighbor. Personally, I don't see this."

"I've felt for years there should have been a standing committee between the (Farmington) township trustees and the city commission that was forced to meet every month and discuss mutual problems. It would have been to the mutual advantage of the taxpayers of this area."

"This is one of the reasons I'm for the Council of Governments, because I've seen the advantage of people meeting regularly and getting to know each other and have some confidence in each other. They'll solve mutual problems if there's proper communication. But you'll never solve anything if you refuse to talk to anyone, you know."

Q. You now have a position with the Council of Governments, ...

HAMLIN: "I was a past chairman of the old Supervisors Inter-County Committee that was a forerunner of the Council of Governments. That was the first type of regional organization for communications."

"I've been on the Council of Government organization board, and I'm temporary chairman of the executive committee. I'd have to refuse to be one of the permanent officers; I've got too much to do, for one thing, and there ought to be new people involved in this. Some of us old-timers, ..."

Q. A question about the Council of Governments: How does it affect the man on the street? COG replaces the Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission and the Supervisors Inter-County Committee. Governments are represented, but how does this affect the people?

HAMLIN: "Well, it can create more efficiency in the area. 'For example, a couple of years ago, the Metropolitan Fund (the foundation which has pushed the COG and which has been providing it staff and offices) had a

study made on municipal building codes. 'Well, they estimated there were areas where between seven and eight million dollars wasted in this area because of different types of codes which the contractor meets when he crosses a boundary."

"Now if the Council of Governments can sell this idea—one uniform modern code for the area—it would be the governments doing it, but it reflects back to the individual taxpayer and homeowner and everyone else."

"Another instance: Originally Detroit said that they would sell water and they would put a line out any time it would be profitable for them. But they were strictly using the suburbs as a revenue-type operation for their Water Department."

He Was 'Louie'

"The Inter-county supervisors had got so that all the leaders in Oakland County knew all those in Wayne County by their first names. When we first started that, people said 'don't ever go across that Eight Mile Road or they'll steal ya blind.' There was a awful suspicion, see?"

"One day, after a meeting in Detroit, Miriam was mayor then and Willis Hall was head of the Board of Commerce, and the three of us were talking. I knew Miriam not as 'Mr. Mayor' but as 'Louie.' And he said, 'Why can't we do something about this?' And Hall was interested, naturally, because industry has a big stake in this."

"So I said, 'There's no question but that something can be done. But you've got to remember that the suburbs are not a poor relation any more, and they're not going to be.' 'What do you want done?'"

"Just a few basic things," I said. 'First, we've got to have a master plan and a guarantee of construction of water lines ahead of needs, rather than behind. You can't build a plant and then the next year give it water; you've got to have water first."

"Second, we expect to pay a little premium for this, but we're not going to support the Detroit taxpayers. So it's got to be written in the contract that it will be based on a certain rate to everyone. 'None of this money can go to the general government of Detroit. It's got to be used for the expansion of the system or to the lowering of rates.'"

"And he (Miriam) said that was reasonable. 'Now this type of a policy would have been set in a formal meeting. This was because we knew them personally, and they knew us. We got a basic contract."

"Prior to that, they had been charging whatever the traffic would bear. The money doesn't go to Detroit's general government, which irritates Cavanaugh, and he makes crazy statements every once in a while that he's going to shut somebody's water off, which you can't do. ..."

"You ask about the benefits to the man on the street. This one thing has proven the benefit."

"We have studies that show that in the future, it's going to be your garbage and rubbish that's the problem."

"The Council of Governments has no power. All it can do is suggest, and make the communities aware that this would be a good way, but it's up to them to implement it."

"This usually happens. You know, people go the right way if it's presented the right way."

Reorganization

Q. Here and around the country, when people discuss councils of government and regional government, fear is expressed from two different directions: One, the fear of the suburbs that they're going to get hooked with the bill for 'Detroit's problems,' and two, the fear of the inner city people—specifically, Negroes—that they'll be outwielded in the organization by the white suburbanites."

HAMLIN: "I don't think they're valid. I don't see the Council of Governments as anything of that sort."

"It's an organization for communication...to get people working to solve problems that are mutual...without any powers COG itself."

"It would be very much against a Council of Governments ever being given any power, because once you get power, you create some kind of a metropolitan-type government."

"If you're going to have metropolitan government, then your county might develop more into that. We've gone a long ways toward that now."

"Getting back on county structure again: 'I think structure is very important, and some day we're going to have to have a whole new charter, and I would hope that some day the Legislature would allow the counties to create the type of charter to suit that particular county. There's not two counties alike."

"I think the kind of charter we'd want in Oakland County wouldn't suit Wayne at all, because they have a different type—their board of supervisors is different, their whole political structure is different. But we should have the flexibility for our voters to create the kind of charter for the needs of this county."

'A Federation'

"I'm not so worried about the big board of supervisors. I used to think, 'Why should we have over seven or eight? If a small group can run a large city, why can't a small group run a large county?'"

"But the county is different from a city, because a county is a federation of governments. I think this large (87 members) board actually operates as a town hall type of thing, and I think it creates a confidence and spirit of cooperation that you wouldn't get if you had it in the hands of a few people."

"But what we could do is have a consolidation of all your commissions. This is some handicap, although we don't have too much trouble—we've probably had more problems with the Road Commission than anywhere else."

"Now the Road Commission is a public works department, and it should be part of the (formal) Public Works Department."



DELOS HAMLIN: An Informal Portrait

ment, responsible directly under the general government of the county.

His Job

Q. As chairman of the Oakland County Board of Supervisors, a body that meets—what? once a month, ...

HAMLIN: "Well, twice a year, in spring and fall, we have statutory meetings; these are tax meetings. The rest of the time we adjourn subject to the call of the chair. We call a meeting whenever there's enough business to bring before the whole board."

Q. Which in practice is how often? HAMLIN: "About 10 to 12 times a year. We might not have a meeting for two months, and then meet twice in one month, depending on the work load."

"We have a very strong committee structure. ... 'As chairman, I appoint all the committees, and I'm a member of all, and I'm supposed to attend them. But I suppose I attend about 10 per cent. An assistant who works for me does, and I get reports back. I don't have time to attend except when there's a problem or where they ask my advice or something, because of the work load in the office and all the other areas. ..."

Q. What is the work load like for the chairman of the board of supervisors? Tell us about the job. HAMLIN: "It varies between counties. The only thing that got me into the job

was years ago the Farmington (sewer) interceptor, because if we didn't get that, this area would never develop to its highest potential."

"So a dozen years ago, when I first became chairman, I immediately started to work to process that project. It was impossible under the old drain laws, so we went to the Legislature and got the Public Works Act. So I started to work a lot more than other chairmen. Prior to that, they changed the chairman every year, and the chairman was more or less a figurehead."

'I Enjoy'

"You couldn't do it for a living. The pay is \$6,000 a year. With all there is to do, I break even."

"We've had Dan Murphy as chairman of the board of auditors, but also we pay him an extra salary as county administrator to perform and legally have power to assume all responsibilities given to him. We use him strictly as a county manager."

"As head of the board, I have all the public relations and political powers—the executive area—but I go through the administrator for everything. I wouldn't talk to the head of a department for anything without going through him (Murphy) first."

"I have a heavy schedule. Of course, I don't think of it as work because I enjoy what I'm doing."

JAN.	
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When Mr. Hamlin Took A Fling On The Stage

Businessman, city councilman and county governmental leader are all of the well known careers of Delos Hamlin. But the chairman of the Oakland County Board of Supervisors has had a lesser known career on the stage.

That's right, on the stage—as an actor.

Specifically, Hamlin appeared as the bride in a 1942 production of "Womanless Wedding" which hit the boards in the then, brand new Farmington High Gym. (The gym is now a part of the old wing at Farmington Junior High on Thomas St.)

In the picture, Hamlin appears as the bride, while "her" husband (who was Roy Plunkie) stands at her left. Behind the happy couple stands (at left) Tracey Conroy, while Lloyd Gulien, judge who performed the ceremony, is to the right.

(Gulien donated the picture from his archives.)

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