

Commissioners spar over special election

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

An impassioned plea for a special election to fill a vacancy on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners triggered a brief, but sharp, exchange over the meaning of freedom.

The exchange came Dec. 7 during a two-hour meeting of the board's finance committee, the last scheduled in 1989.

The issue is how the board should replace Anne M. Hobart, R-Mifflin, who is resigning as commissioner in the 4th District (White Lake Township and part of Waterford Township) to take a job with Oakland County.

Hobart, a retired teacher with a master's degree, is resigning to become director of community within the county's solid waste division that is implementing a \$470 million trash management system.

A commissioner for more than 10 years, Hobart was one of 18 applicants who applied for the job, according to county officials.

Most commissioners want the board to pick a successor. That would give Republicans, who outnumber Democrats 20 to 7, the power to pick a successor.

Republicans, including board chairman Paul Pernick, Rochester, say picking a successor would eliminate the need for a special election that could cost more than \$50,000.

THEY NOTE that whoever becomes interim commissioner will be up for re-election in November. So why go through the expense of a special election when voters will voice their preference in three months later?

One commissioner, including Lawrence Pernick, D-Southfield, insisted a special election is the only way to accurately measure the preference of voters in that district.

In addition to accusing them of wanting to handicap a successor, Pernick contends Republicans are subverting the voice of the people.

"Look at what's happening in Eastern Europe," Pernick said. "People there are on the verge of revolution for the right to elect their own officials."

"In Poland, East Germany, Hungary and other places, people are demanding free elections," Pernick said. "In light of what's happening there and in China shouldn't we, (the board of commissioners) opt for free elections?"

While some commissioners may have thought Pernick was bordering on the melodramatic, Commissioner John G. Pappageorge, R-Troy, took offense.

"I think it's a matter of clarification," Pappageorge said in a curt voice. "The people who vote to appoint (a successor) are not against freedom. I just think a special election would be an unnecessary waste of money."

The exchange lasted less than two minutes, and never reached the shouting stage. Both commissioners remained friendly.

Pappageorge, a retired Army colonel, later said privately, "I served two terms in Vietnam. I don't need a lecture on freedom."

Pernick's position is rooted in philosophy, rather than pragmatism. Nobody ever said democracy was efficient, he said. "Just the most representative."

"The person who fills that spot could be there for a long time," he said. "Let the people decide."

Keeping tabs

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SHARON LEMIEUX/staff photographer

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