

Well-traveled

Commissioners eyeing travel expenses

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Now that the horse is gone, Oakland County Commissioners are looking for a new one.

After overspending the travel budget by nearly \$30,000 last year, commissioners this week will address limiting or cutting expenses for out-of-town meetings.

Commissioners spent \$89,030 for travel in 1991, according to the county budget department, or \$29,678 more than the \$59,352 allocated. Commissioners went to places like Hawaii, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and Traverse City.

Just two commissioners — Donald Bishop, R-Rochester Hills, and James Keenan, D-Pontiac — did not take any out of town trips in 1991. Records reflect they spent no money for travel.

BUT THEIR frequent flying colleagues more than made up the slack, making this board one of the most well-traveled in history — despite frequent calls for austerity and belt-tightening.

The most traveled commissioner, according to county records, is Herbert Price, D-Pontiac. Price spent almost \$6,000. Spending more than \$4,000 for travel were Huel McPherson, D-Hazel Park, Thomas A. Law, R-West Bloomfield, Hoy Rewold, R-

Oakland Township, and Dennis Aaron, D-Oak Park.

"We're going to take a look at our travel policy," Commissioner Larry Crake, R-Westland, said Friday. The newly elected chairman of the Board of Commissioners, Crake called a meeting of the board's Oversight Committee for Wednesday to discuss travel policies.

THE TOPIC will also be discussed Tuesday at a GOP caucus and could come up at Thursday's meeting of the entire board.

One thing Crake would like his colleagues to consider is closer adherence to the board's old travel "guideline." That rule of thumb stipulated that each commissioner could spend up to \$1,500 for travel without prior approval by the board chairman. Anything over that, however, needed the chairman's OK.

Overspending the travel budget is nothing new for commissioners. Last year, for example, commissioners spent \$53,352 traveling, or \$5,727 more than the \$47,625 budgeted.

In the previous year, they spent \$6,037 more than the \$51,938 earmarked for out of town trips.

BUT WITH the 1991 travel budget nearly \$30,000 out of whack, Crake decided to talk about the problem. When commissioners exhaust the \$1,500 in travel allowances they are

entitled to, "I will approve no further expenditure," Crake said in a memo dated Jan. 30.

But that could be a penny-wise and pound-foolish approach, said a number of commissioners, who defend spending as much as necessary for travel, even in a budget crunch.

"We have several commissioners who serve on various steering committees," said former board chairman Hoy Rewold, who this month stepped down as a county commissioner. "And they're expected to attend meetings."

He was referring to steering committees for the National Association of Counties and the Michigan Association of Counties. Both organizations examine government issues and formulate positions that are sometimes incorporated into legislation enacted in Washington or Lansing.

BY HAVING commissioners on those committees, Rewold said, Oakland benefits in two ways — input into pending legislation and firsthand information about what other communities are doing about common problems.

This is particularly helpful, Rewold said, when commissioners are trying to deal with issues such as solid waste management or mass transportation.

Commissioner Law, who went to Hawaii, Salt Lake City, Washington, D.C., and Traverse City, said each of his trips were approved before he went. "And every dollar is justified."

"I'm a member of the NACO steering committee on transportation," he said. "If the county doesn't

think that's a good investment, I won't go."

COMMISSIONER LAWRENCE R. Pernick, D-Southfield, went to Atlanta as a member of the NACO Task Force on AIDS. "I think it's very important to find out what's happening in other areas," he said. "How other communities are addressing similar problems."

Pernick, who spent \$3,500 traveling last year, said he is not aware of any abuses by commissioners. "During my 20-plus years on the board, I've not seen any abuses."

It may be that individual commissioners skip a meeting or two in favor of the golf course, Pernick said. Or one or two might back in the sun instead of attending the workshop for which they were signed up.

"BUT THAT'S rare," he insisted. "On balance, I think the county gets good value for our travel budget."

Commissioner Davon L. Moffitt, R-Farmington Hills, went to Hawaii as a member of the NACO steering committee on environment, energy and land use. Information he obtained in that committee was helpful in formulating his opinion on the county's solid waste program, he said.

Commissioner Lillian Jaffe Oaks, D-Southfield, who logged more than \$3,500 in travel expenses, said she is extremely careful about spending.

"I only submit legitimate expenses to be paid by the county," said Oaks, who is on NACO committees on health and job training. "If an expense is questionable, I pay for it myself."

Monday, February 10, 1992 O&E

10/5A

International business jobs for women up for discussion

Karen McDonald, international business coordinator for Mott Community College in Flint, will discuss international business opportunities for women at the monthly meeting of Zonta International of Southeastern Oakland County. The meeting is 6 p.m. Wednesday

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