

# Changing times

## Public works head shrinks department

The Observer & Eccentric spotlights another of County Executive L. Brooks Patterson's appointees and the job he is performing for Oakland residents.

BY RALPH R. ECHTINAW  
STAFF WRITER

If Dave Ross hadn't sprained his ankle one day in 1960, he might be a retired marine or a

dead Vietnam veteran today instead of Oakland County's public works director.

After graduating from Waterford Township High School in 1959, Ross directed his path into the United States Marine Corps, where he trained as an aircraft navigator. But fate intervened when Ross sprained the left ankle that had harbored the polio virus when he was a lad. "I thought I broke the damn thing," he remembers.

Said the marine doctor: "You'll be a cripple by the time you're 30 (if you stay in the corps)."

So with a medical, but honorable, discharge in hand, Ross returned home and briefly eked out an existence doing "all the grunt work" on Chevrolet's Corvair line in the Willow Run plant.

### Hauling trash

But Ross disliked the repetition of assembly line toil and cast about for additional opportunities. He hired on with Oakland County in the public works department about as far down in the pecking order as one could get in 1964. "I used to haul all the trash and the laundry, tear down walls with a sledge hammer," he said.

By and by, Ross began taking night classes at what was then called Lawrence Institute of Technology, now Lawrence Technological University. Thirteen years later, he became the first in his family to get a college degree, two degrees, actually. One in building construction technology, the other in business administration.

In 1976, the year he graduated from Lawrence, Ross was promoted to manager of the operations division of public works, where he served until last January.

### Brooks wants to see you

Confident of being elected county executive in November 1992, L. Brooks Patterson began

selecting his future staff well before the votes were cast.

"I had a meeting with (Patterson) in October," Ross said. "I didn't think it was a job interview or anything like that."

But it was, Patterson says now that Ross is an "excellent administrator" and came highly recommended "by a lot of people."

Said Ross: "I was sort of stunned by (the offer) because I didn't expect him to offer me this job."

So after 29 years with the county, Ross ascended to directorhood, although he reigns over a shrinking department with growing responsibility.

Twelve years ago there were 258 employees in the maintenance and operations division. Now there are 199 people to service 1.6 million square feet of county buildings, and Ross is projecting 183 for 1995 as more of the work is contracted out.

"The old philosophy was to try to do everything internally," Ross said, but with contractors there's more flexibility. "If they don't perform you get a different one."

### Where'd they go?

Then in June the entire water and sewer division of Public Works (130 people and a \$44 million budget) was transferred to the hallowed of drain commissioner George Kuhn, who hopes to save county taxpayers up to \$1 million by eliminating the duplication of services that existed.

Still, Ross runs one of the biggest departments in Oakland County government with responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of 60 buildings and construction of new buildings, such as the ongoing 140,000 square-foot expansion of the courthouse.

Ross is proud that the county builds its edifices to last and hasn't closed down a county building yet. "We don't build these buildings like a developer does, to get out of them in 10 years," he said.



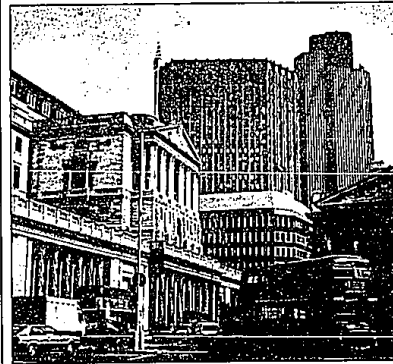
JERRY ZOLNERSKY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ross realm: Dave Ross, the public works director of Oakland County, poses over a master plan depicting the county government complex on Telegraph Road in Pontiac. Ross' department is responsible for maintenance of all 50-some buildings in the county realm.

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