

Patterson: 'It's not like the Mafia took over'

BY PAT MURPHY

Staff Writer

Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson disputes the assessment by prosecutor Richard Thompson that the charges against two Rochester Hills officials and six current or former members of the sheriff's department constitute the "worst case of political corruption in Oakland County history."

In terms of numbers, the scandals are extensive, Patterson acknowledged. And the charges are serious. "But it's not like the Mafia took over," he said.

Patterson agreed with the assessment that most of the people accused — if convicted — would be classified as petty thieves, not violent criminals.

In the wake of the charges, two views seem to prevail on John F. Nichols among Oakland County representatives of our communities.

One view holds that Nichols — Oakland County's cross between Gen. George Patton and President Harry Truman — was betrayed by people he trusted.

But once he saw corruption, he went after it," said county commissioner Shelley G. Taub, Bloomfield Hills. "He didn't try to hide anything, he tried to find solutions."

The other view is quite different. Nichols is the new poster child for term limits, said one high ranking Republican official who did not want to be identified.

"This raises serious questions about his ability to manage," said another, who also spoke only on the condition of anonymity. "What was going on? Why wasn't he on top of things?"

Other officials simply want information.

"I want some explanation," said commissioner Donn L. Wolf, Farmington Hills. "If something like this happened within my company (Detroit Edison), I'd want answers."

Taub, Wolf and others gave their views in response to questions asked Thursday at the regular meeting of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners. They were interviewed along with other officials including County Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

Wait and see

Most were willing to put aside concerns about the guilt or innocence of 11 people arrested last week. Most have already been arraigned, and the courts will generally decide their fate.

But the basic question remains: Do two separate scandals within

the sheriff's department — resulting in criminal charges against three command officers, three deputies and the mayor of Rochester Hills — indicate structural problems?

The two scandals were spelled out Tuesday at a press conference by Nichols and Thompson.

"A pervasive pattern of corruption and misconduct at the work-release facility," said Thompson, resulted in inmates getting privileges in exchange for gifts or favors to command officers or deputies.

"Food and alcohol were routinely bartered in exchange for extended hours away from the facility by inmates," Thompson said. In other cases, sheriff's officers got reduced prices on auto repairs and home improvements in exchange for special treatment to inmates who were supposed to be released only during working hours, and then under close surveillance.

An outlined by Thompson, the situation was equally corrupt at the Rochester Hills substation where county deputies, under contract with the city, perform police duties.

The investigation uncovered billing practices under which then Capt. Gerald Carlin allegedly received \$20,574 in unwarranted overtime pay, said the prosecutor. Allegedly with the cooperation of Rochester Hills Mayor Billie Ireland and her assistant, Doris Keylon, command officers at the substation received illegal Christmas bonuses and the county was cheated out of more than \$425,000 over two years.

In the work-release scandal, seven people were arrested — former Capt. Gerald Reeves, former Sgt. James Costa, suspended deputies Arthur Kinney and Hollis Spear and three inmates. They are charged with 24 felonies.

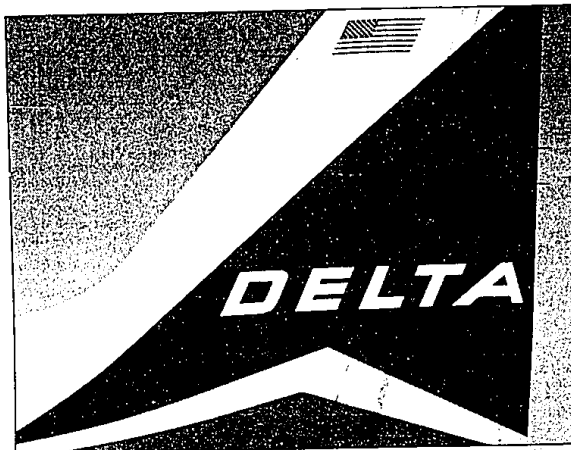
At the Rochester Hills substation, four people were arrested — former Capt. Carlin, suspended Deputy Michael C. Schmitzer, Mayor Ireland and her assistant Keylon. They are charged with a total of 47 charges, 39 felonies and four misdemeanors.

A sad day

"This is an embarrassment," said county commissioner John P. Garfield, R-Rochester Hills. "I don't know how this could have slid by internal controls."

County commissioner Thomas A. Law, R-West Bloomfield, said the scandals and arrests constitute a sad day for Oakland and its image as a county of clean government.

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