

Closing in on the county executive race

Patterson boasts of accomplishments Hamilton plans hands-on approach

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

With the Nov. 5 election about five weeks away, County Executive L. Brooks Patterson exudes confidence.

And why not? Since he was elected in 1992, Oakland's economy has been booming. "Oakland is the engine that drives the state's economy," he has said repeatedly.

At service clubs or at private parties, Patterson beams when noting that Oakland's economy is bigger — more robust — than the economies of several states. The Somerset Collection (which opened this summer in Troy) created thousands of new jobs.

Government isn't responsible for that economic boom, Patterson modestly admits. It's the Fortune 500 companies that reside here, he said. It's the small businesses expanding here. It's the Oakland entrepreneurs trying to expand their operations into the global market.

The county's primary job, according to Patterson, is to minimize regulations and maintain a climate conducive to good business. He and the county should offer a nudge once in



Patterson

the means of getting to and from work is crucial to a healthy business climate, Patterson said. The same for providing workers and businesses the opportunity to upgrade skills.

Politically Patterson is at the top of his game. He struggled earlier this year when he bucked Gov. John Engler over how federal funds were to be divided — the governor wanted a bigger share for the state, while Patterson and Democrats Ed McNamara and Dennis Archer wanted more for southeast Michigan.

But while Patterson got the cold shoulder from Engler for a while, political wags say the executive has recovered, and his political stature is taller than ever.

"People ask if I'm going to run for governor," Patterson told the editorial board of The Ecce-

tric Newspapers. "I hear that a lot."

"But I'm not sure I'd want that," he continued. "I do know that I expect to serve out the remainder of my (now) term."

As a political realist, Patterson is aware of polls showing President Clinton with a substantial lead. He's also aware that strong presidential candidates could mean trouble for some of his Republican colleagues.

"You can look for Brooks to be very active in this campaign," said one confidant. The execu-

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Ed Hamilton tells a story about campaigning that tells a story about Ed Hamilton.

Two weeks ago, at a VFW candidate forum in Otonville, Hamilton presented himself as a "high tech Democrat." He explained how he would take skills and practices developed at the Chrysler Corp., where he's a new vehicle launch manager, and apply them to what he sees as a bloated county government.

At least part of the message apparently hit home. Hamilton



Hamilton

year-old Hamilton took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and got under the hood. "It was a problem with the serpentine belt," he said. "I couldn't fix it on the spot, but I could start the process."

The parallel is significant. As Oakland County executive, Hamilton said he would take a hands-on approach to government.

"The auto industry learned to do more with less," he has said repeatedly. "Why can't county government?"

That doesn't mean laying off county employees, Hamilton insisted. But it does mean upgrading individual skills and expecting people to work smarter, if not harder.

The incumbent executive — L. Brooks Patterson — is at least

part of the problem. Hamilton said. "Why does he need two deputies? The president has one vice president, the governor has one lieutenant governor."

Hamilton acknowledges that the incumbent hasn't done a bad job. Ideas like the Business Round table — initiated after Patterson was elected in 1992 — were long overdue and help create and maintain a good business climate, he said.

"But the county can do better. I give Patterson a grade of 'B.' But I think the county should be getting an 'A.'"

Part of Patterson's success, according to Hamilton, is attributable to the media and other agencies that he said neither hold the incumbent accountable nor demand better.

Last week, for example, the incumbent didn't attend a forum at Congregation Sharey Zedek, one of the first public candidate nights, and so far one of the biggest. Patterson didn't attend, but sent James M. Alexander, a friend and former chair of the Oakland County Republican Party, in his place.

"Patterson said he had a scheduling conflict," said Hamil-

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A look at the candidates

Under Public Act 130, the state law under which Oakland County is organized, the county executive has a variety of responsibilities and duties. He or she shall, for example, supervise and control departments not headed by an elected official such as the sheriff or prosecutor; coordinate activities of the county and unify management of its affairs; enforce all orders, rules and

ordinances of the county board of commissioners — except for those vetoed.

In short, the executive is the chief executive officer for the county who is responsible for a majority of the county's 4,300 employees and oversees the annual budget, about \$450 million for 1996.

The job pays \$117,792 annually.

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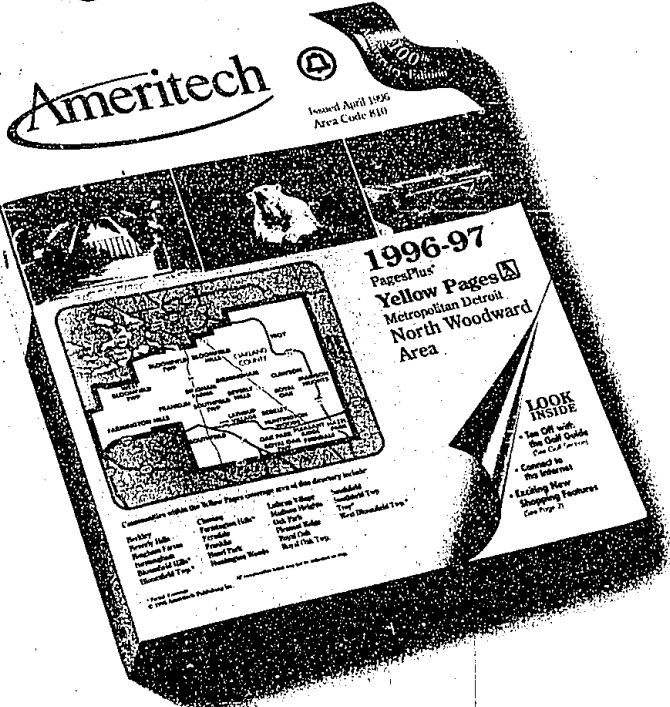
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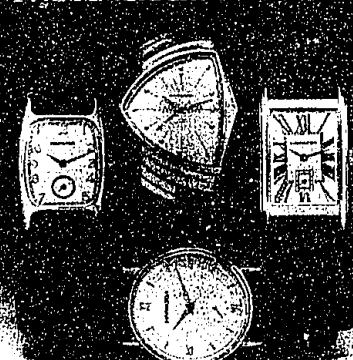
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