

OCC board drops plan to switch campus presidents

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Amid undercurrents of politics, trustees of Oakland Community College rejected, 4-3, Chancellor Richard Thompson's plan to have two campus presidents swap posts.

George Keith was scheduled Sept. 22 to move to the helm of the Royal Oak-Southfield campus and be replaced at Orchard Ridge by RO-S's Martha Smydra.

But 117 faculty and staff members from RO-S petitioned the board Sept. 15 to keep Smydra, "who has provided the unique vision, leadership and enthusiasm under which we have prospered and melded into a cohesive team to move our two-site campus into the 21st Century."

The petition, presented by faculty member Deborah Randolph, said:

"To move Dr. Smydra at this crucial time would be detrimental to the entire education development of our campus, including the physical renovations of our site and the planned visit (next year) of the North Central Association (accreditation) team." It found no fault, however, with Keith.

A second petition asked the board to reject a post swap between two directors of campus services — David Bugny of

Auburn Hills and George Mergner of Orchard Ridge. The board will receive that formal recommendation next month from Thompson.

The board vote came in a sweltering room with an overflow crowd of 110, many wearing union buttons as negotiations with two non-faculty locals dragged on.

How they voted

Voting to reject the Keith-for-Smydra swap were board chair Judith Wiser of West Bloomfield, vice chair Janice Simmons of Rochester Hills, and trustees Jeanne Towar and Anne Scott, both of Royal Oak.

Supporting it were secretary Carol Crow and trustee Sandra Ritter, both of Waterford, and Pamela Davis of Sterling Heights.

"We've had a lot of disruptions," said Simmons, warning against generating "ill feeling" if the move took place. She referred to the 1995 firing of a previous chancellor, the hiring of new campus presidents at Auburn Hills and Highland Lakes, and a general shakeup in the central office staff.

"We're too close to our North Central accreditation," Simmons added.

Wiser agreed, adding: "I've backed the chancellor before, in

public and private. This is not a personal put-down."

"We have two campuses now with substantially new presidents," said Towar. "This would give us all four new presidents."

"I'm gosh-darned tired of seeing Royal Oak-Southfield treated like a second class citizen," said Scott.

'Use experience'

Crow argued for supporting Thompson because: "If we run the day-to-day operations, what do we need a chancellor for?"

"I've seen other chancellors move people around like chess players," said Ritter, in her 20th year on the board. "Moving around — that's how you keep the vitality. We're not five campuses; we're one college."

Thompson, who saw his first nominee for the Auburn Hills presidency rejected by the board last spring, stood firm, even as he saw the votes pile up against his plan.

"I want to use the experience of long-term presidents and give them fresh views," he said. "The bulk of the college wants new leadership and new vision."

Thompson said rejecting his plan might harm OCC in the North Central accreditation team's eyes because it would raise "concerns about the nature of the board leadership. We've

been transferring people for 20 years."

Thompson spoke against a backdrop of "restructuring" the college — rethinking how it does everything. "People's lives will be impacted," he said. "I want new eyes at those campuses. They're doing fine jobs at the other institutions. That's precisely why I want to move them."

Neither Keith nor Smydra commented publicly about the plan. After the meeting, Keith said he would do whatever the boss wanted him to do.

Keith started at OCC in 1967 as an English teacher, served as a dean at Royal Oak-Southfield from 1984-92 and was interim president in 1992. In 1993 he was appointed president of Orchard Ridge, which draws 7,000 students to its Farmington Hills site.

Smydra joined OCC in 1992 as president of Royal Oak-Southfield. Previously she was a dean at neighboring Macomb Community College. RO-S has 7,900 students.

'Take-away attitude'

George Mergner, director of campus services at Orchard Ridge, noted that Trustees Local 214, representing about 120 deans and professional staff, will resume collective bargaining with the college Sept. 26 with a

mediator.

Mergner urged the college to send in a team that "gets rid of its take-away attitude" and to assign at least one campus president to the management team. The Trustees won a representation election in January of 1996 but still hasn't reached its first contract settlement.

Rose Couture, representing AFSCME Local 2042, said she was concerned about short-staffing offices such as financial aids and registration because "a lot of people can't get the hang of technology." She recalled part of OCC's mission is to "be accessible to students."

Thompson said the college won't use new tax money approved by voters in mid-1995 for operations and salaries but will stick with an 80-20 division of "charter" tax money approved in 1964 — 80 percent for salaries, 20 percent for other operating expenses.

"There is no plan for have students move from their site to get financial services," he said. Reorganization, he said, "will disempower people. We can't do business the way we always have. We can't sit in our offices and do business the way we have for 80 years."

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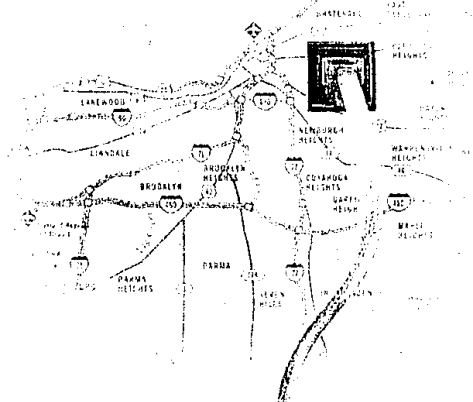
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