

New sheriff

Michael Bouchard wastes little time organizing department



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLNERT

New: Oakland County's new sheriff, Michael Bouchard, started his first week on the job and is busy trying to get things in order — his style.

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Michael J. Bouchard wasted little time reshaping the sheriff's department to his image.

His first staff meeting was 10 a.m. Tuesday, less than 20 hours after being unanimously selected to replace the late John F. Nichols, who died Dec. 18.

"My message (to staff commanders) is to work together," said Bouchard, who cited sagging morale as his top concern as head of the 915-member sheriff's department.

Morale likely suffered, Bouchard told reporters, when some people within the department — uncertain about who would succeed Nichols — felt

they had to choose sides. "That was natural," Bouchard said, once it became obvious the sheriff's health was failing and somebody would likely be named to replace him.

Bouchard didn't think sagging morale was a crisis. But during his interview Monday before the Vacancy Committee — charged under state law with naming a

successor to Nichols — Bouchard said boosting morale would be his number one priority if selected Oakland's first sheriff.

Thomas E. Quisenberry, a major and chief of staff within the department, Tuesday said it was misleading to refer to a "morale problem" within the department. "People were uncertain and uneasy," he admitted, "particularly when it became obvious Nichols wouldn't finish his term."

"People were afraid," he said, "and they were worried about change. But I don't think there was a morale problem. If there was a morale problem, it's gone."

Tuesday's staff meeting had gone a long way toward eliminating any anxieties, he said. "The sheriff spoke briefly with each of us, and he assured everybody there would be no drastic change. It was very upbeat."

"The sheriff also made it very clear he is in charge," said Quisenberry, a Rochester resident.

Capt. Michael McCabe characterized the meeting as a "get to know each other" session. "We didn't discuss any big policy issues. But he put everybody at ease by telling them to continue doing the job they were doing."

When the Vacancy Committee voted for Bouchard, after about 20 minutes of deliberation, one of those who applauded vigorously was Undersheriff Henry Buffa, probably the leading candidate behind Bouchard — in part because of a letter from Nichols who urged "support" for his efforts to become Sheriff of Oakland County.

Buffa applauded Bouchard even though it put his future in doubt. "I have no job," he told reporters. "I'm going back to clean out my office."

Bouchard said he expects to name his undersheriff by the end of the week. While he said he would not exclude Buffa as a

possible candidate, others said the new sheriff would likely pick his own person as second in command — possibly Quisenberry, the department's chief of staff; McCabe, deputy chief of staff; or Capt. Barnett Jones, head of the protective services division, who lives in Lake Orion.

Actually Bouchard didn't wait until Tuesday to address his announced goal of bolstering morale. Within hours of resigning from the State Senate to become sheriff, Bouchard accepted an invitation from a few command officers to get together for an adult beverage at Drinks North, a restaurant near the county complex.

"There were some toasts, and there was a lot of jubilation and relief," said one of the revelers. "Jubilation at Bouchard being the new sheriff and relief that the process was over."

While Bouchard said easing tensions was a priority item, he also emphasized that his will be a unique management style. "Nobody can copy John Nichols," he said, "and I won't try. I have my own style. Not better or worse, just different."

Among the goals listed by Bouchard is addressing over crowding in the jail — possibly

by expanding the boot camp, the highly successful and often imitated program established by his predecessor.

"The boot camp has facilities for 60 inmates," Bouchard noted, "while the typical class has about 30 inmates." Perhaps the department can find a way to maximize those unused beds, the new sheriff said, for Oakland inmates or for nonviolent prisoners from other counties.

Political considerations — or at least Bouchard's knowledge of the political system — played a role in his being named the new sheriff, said Prosecutor David Gorcey, chair of the Vacancy Committee charged under state law with the task of picking Nichols' successor. "But it was a small part," he said.

Other committee members were county Clerk G. William Caddell and chief probate Judge Eugene Arthur Moore. "It makes you proud to realize there were so many diverse and highly qualified candidates willing to serve," said Moore.

"But Sen. Bouchard was the most qualified of all," he said.

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University to celebrate African-American month

Oakland University will mark African-American Celebration Month Jan. 18-Feb. 19, exploring other cultures with educational and social activities open to the public.

Major events of the month, themed Artistic Expressions of African American Life and History, include a speech by author and poet, Nikki Giovanni 5 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 28, at Meadow Brook Theatre. Often controversial, she is remembered for her militancy during the turbulent 1960s, becoming quite popular as one of the New Black Poets of the era.

Tickets will be available

through TicketMaster outlets and the Center for Student Activities Service Window, 49 Oakland Center (OC).

OU will also host The Tuskegee Airmen, black pilots who fought during World War II in the U.S. Army Air Corps. They will speak noon to 1:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 4, 201 Dodge Hall. There is no cost.

The opening event Monday, Jan. 18, will honor the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., beginning with the annual march that symbolizes the unification of all cultures on OU's campus.

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