

DEMOCRATIC STATE OF THE
COUNTY MESSAGE.

Oakland County, Michigan.
Board of Commissioners. Demo-
cratic Caucus.

R-OCDOC
JS
411
.P48
1979

DEMOCRATIC STATE OF THE COUNTY MESSAGE

-- Commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick
Democratic Caucus Chairperson
2-15-79

REFERENCE BOOK
For Room 805 Only

Mr. Chairperson, County Executive, Members of the Board of Commissioners, Ladies and Gentlemen: On behalf of the Democratic Caucus, I speak to the state of Oakland County government and our goals as elected officials within that government.

Oakland County government today is a study in contrasts. On the positive side we have achieved success in programs for public employment training, juvenile detention and rehabilitation, and expanded health service, as well as in regional plans for dealing with water quality, transportation, sewer and water construction and maintaining a balanced budget. These programs have been fully supported by both political parties as well as the County Executive. We believe that bipartisan effort and cooperation is an absolute necessity if other programs are to be equally successful.

Right now, however, bi-partisan government in Oakland County is dead. In the November, 1978 election, Democratic commissioner candidates received 45% of the popular vote, yet Democrats hold zero committee chairmanships, zero vice chairmanships, zero representation on the County Road Commission, and zero representation on the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. On the Parks and Recreation Commission, only one seat out of nine, or 11%, is held by a Democrat, and on the Board of Institutions, one out of seven seats, or 14%, is held by a Democrat. Most important, on half of the committees of the Board of Commissioners--where most of the behind-the-scenes work is accomplished--the Democratic membership has been reduced from 40% last year to 33 1/3 this year.

Thomas Jefferson said it very well:

All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is to prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate which would be oppression.

The key word here is "reasonable." We do not believe it is reasonable to assume that only the majority party is capable of making meaningful contributions to the welfare of Oakland County's citizens. We do not believe it is reasonable--or even

~~wise to try to stifle dissent.~~ We wish to highlight the fact that a shift of only 1500 votes out of a total of nearly 300,000--or 1/2 of 1%--would have transferred the majority leadership on the County Board to the Democrats. The political make-up of the County is not overwhelmingly Republican, as some would like to believe, and it is supremely arrogant for any party to assume a mandate that was never given them. Republicans may stick their collective head in the sand and pretend we Democrats do not exist. But we do exist, we do care about our County, and a wise and secure leadership will not be afraid to work together with us, in harmony, for the good of the citizens all of us were elected to serve.

In addition to this major flaw, we see additional rips and tears in the fabric of County government, for example, lawsuits between members of the branches of government, indictments of public officials, a grand jury investigation, and stalemates in our ability to work successfully with local governments, the state legislature, and the Congress.

In regard to the County Executive, we strongly feel that Public Act 139, the Unified County Government Law, has been at best a disappointment and at worst a failure. Major county officials often work at cross purposes and do not set the standards of leadership, excellence and productivity that this law should have encouraged. Before endorsing any additional centralization of powers under this act, we would need to see a definite improvement in existing operations.

In order to resolve these divisive issues, we need to re-define the role of both the Executive and the County Commission. To this end, we suggest the following:

1. The establishment of regular leadership meetings involving the Executive and leaders of both parties.
2. Adoption by the State Legislature of amendments to Public Act 139 to clarify the veto power of the Executive and restore the traditional constitutional balance of power between the 3 branches of County government.
3. The immediate re-alignment of existing committee structures to proportionately represent the 40% make-up of Democratic members on the Board.

4. The election of Democratic vice chairpersons on each committee. This procedure of sharing leadership proved effective during the years when Democrats led the Board.

5. The restructuring of the membership on the independent county boards and commissions to reflect a bi-partisan cross section. Until this occurs, however, the Democratic Caucus will appoint ad hoc representatives to all Boards and Commissions to which Democratic membership has been so unfairly diluted or eliminated, and these representatives will act as observers and reporters to protect the public interest. We shall carry out the intent of the "open meetings" law and preserve the representative form of government in Oakland County.

At the same time, we believe it is necessary for members of the Board to carry out their responsibilities with renewed vigor. Each Commissioner should undertake to work with local school districts to educate our young people about the role of county government. Each Commissioner should also act as an ombudsman to the needs of his constituents and be available by phone or in person. Finally, we believe every Commissioner who accepts the obligation to serve on a committee should faithfully meet that obligation, or resign from that committee.

Regarding fiscal accountability, Oakland County has been blessed for many years with a growth in assessed valuation. The increased funds provided by this growth--without a concurrent tax-rate reduction--have covered up many shortcomings and inefficiencies. We stress that it is not enough to have a balanced budget. That budget should reflect the best possible analysis and evaluation of services being provided.

In addition, new priorities should be determined from time to time so that programs whose value has diminished are reduced or eliminated. To carry out this function, it's essential that for the first time, Oakland County government invest in a certified, independent and objective financial and management audit of our massive spending program. Also, we believe that the budgeting process should be scheduled to begin by April 1st with an Executive recommendation to the Finance Committee by September 1st.

Other recommendations are as follows:

1. The establishment of a satellite service center in the southern and western portions of the County to house the County Clerk, Treasurer,

- Friend of the Court, Veterans' Services and several Circuit Court judges.
2. The seeking of legislative changes to revise CETA and other federal program formulas to establish greater benefits to communities with the greatest needs.
 3. An end to the constant study of the problem of solid waste disposal and the implementing of a program to bring relief to our citizens within two years.
 4. A request that the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council study and quickly recommend a restructuring of the organized crime strike force to allow the sheriff's department and local police agencies to be more directly involved.
 5. The securing of federal funding for a modern helicopter to implement traffic safety and emergency medical service programs.
 6. The placing of the office of Public Works Commissioner on the ballot in 1980 to replace the drain commissioner and the appendix of separate public works operations.
 7. A halt to the practice of rewarding our friends with government jobs to the detriment of providing important services and policy decisions. For example, after years of complaints about the mismanagement in our data processing department, due to incompetent personnel, we are finally getting professional advice in this area.

Finally--in spite of the criticisms we have voiced, we do see hope for success in providing needed services if we are honest enough to recognize both our accomplishments and our failures. The Democratic Caucus continues its offer of support to those who will accept the challenge of cooperation and bi-partisan effort to build an efficient, productive, and less costly government for Oakland County.