

# IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

## Let the voters elect the County Board Chair

A couple of county board members have a nasty habit of trying to trivialize women who raise legitimate issues by labeling us as "petty," "vindictive," "getting personal." As a member of the board, I've seen it happen often in the last two years. Not only is this kind of name calling an excuse for not addressing an issue with which they disagree or can't handle, it is also blatant gender stereotyping. This kind of discrimination has no place on a public board in the year 2007.

This tactic was finally directed at me at a recent board meeting when I tried to raise the issue of committee assignments under the new Republican leadership. Of course I'm upset my party split and elected a Republican chairman, but I've been in politics for 45 years and I've won and lost many battles. I am not validated by events on that board or anything else external.

For the last eight years the county board has had bi-partisan leadership, under Democrat and Republican chairmen. Lomac Payton, a Democrat, was the first chairman to ever appoint committee chairmen based on merit instead of party affiliation. Sally Keener, Republican, was the next chairman to follow suit. Even though we didn't have committees during her term as chair, Democrat Jan Occhi did the same in her temporary appointments.

Even though Republicans fill only seven of 15 seats on the board, all standing committees, as well as one of the two ad hoc committees, are now chaired by Republican board members. Not only are assignments unequal with regard to party affiliation, but some board members have only two committee assignments, while others have four and several appointments for representation outside the board. "Outside" appointments refer to those representatives of the board to the Health Department, Housing Authority or 911 Boards, for example. The board leadership simply does not represent the board members or the voters.

That should be a major concern for everyone, but I've been told by the chairman of the board, who quoted the States Attorney, that the issue is not to be discussed further.

My answer to that? Baloney. Basic board organization should be discussed

thoroughly, as it was for the last two years, and this arrangement goes against every basic belief the board has expressed. With all the concern for committees taking ownership of their departments, Wayne Saline was again appointed to the Finance Committee, extending his membership on that committee to eight years, six years as chairman.

I am not unhappy with my committee assignments, but I have served for two prior terms when I was never appointed chairman of a committee because I am a Democrat. My first term started in 1973, and to see us slip back into the old, partisan game thirty-four years later is discouraging and disheartening.

One of my campaign promises in 2004 was to work for direct election by the people of the county board chairman. At the time of redistricting, the county board can decide that the chairman be elected at large without being a member of the board, (like a city mayor), or as a member of the board. If the chairman is elected at large not as a board member, his or her term would be four years. If the chairman were required to be a board member, the term would be two years.

An editorial in the Peoria Journal Star in 1994 listed some of the benefits of direct election of a chairman. The people directly elect our other county officers — county clerk, circuit clerk, treasurer, state's attorney etc. - why not the top official of the county board? Backroom deals for committee chairmanships and vote swaps would be reduced. A more open process might produce more open government. An elected board chairman, affirmed by the voters as the county's leader, could operate on a more level playing field when working with other local governmental executive officers on items of mutual interest. Best of all, the chairman would be directly accountable to the voters who put him or her in office — all the voters, not just county board members.

I say we go for it, and I will be around in two years to represent the people and try to make it happen.

*Caroline Porter is a freelance writer, a member of the Knox County Board (D-1) and can be reached at [cporter@galesburg.net](mailto:cporter@galesburg.net).*

Dec 21, 2006