

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Burgland launches this Democrat's career

With a twinkle in his eye, but with determination, past county board chairman Dick Burgland, who died last week, made it possible for me to serve as the first woman on the Knox County Board.

As a candidate for the board in 1972, the year of redistricting, I was the only Democrat on the District 2 ballot, facing an opposing slate of five, male, incumbent Republicans. I had moved back to town 9 months earlier, but there wasn't much of a gap in that election, between the top vote-getter and me, placing sixth with five to be elected.

In the summer of 1973, Bruce Stratton, a local attorney and board member from my district, told me he was moving to Springfield and would have to resign. He said he wasn't sure of the process of replacing board members under the new State Constitution, but wanted to give me a "heads up."

I swung into action and informed county board chairman Dick Burgland that I was interested in being appointed. I wrote letters and called the board members, trying to meet with them AND their wives (very important.) There were four of us who wanted to be appointed, but I was the only one who had been a candidate for the office. Of course, the other three were Republican men. I had been active in the League of Women Voters for years and was well versed on basic government issues. Most of the men knew I was the most qualified, but the question was, with four Democrats and 20 Republicans, how would I ever get approved?

The day of the appointment the atmosphere was electric. The four candidates were sitting in a row and the appointment was the first order of business. Burgland dropped a bombshell when he announced that the election would be by secret ballot. At this point county board member Wilbur Danner, now deceased, marched down the aisle in the huge board room, waving papers and called out, "Mr. Chairman, I have an opinion from the State's Attorney that a secret ballot is unconstitutional." Burgland slammed down the gavel and growled, "Sit down Mr. Danner, you are out of order."

The election was held and I received 11 votes, the next closest candidate received 10. The remaining votes were split between the other two. When the results were announced the board erupted into clapping and conversation and Lord knows what other reactions. I have to say that was probably the most exciting moment of my life. The newspaper headlines blared, "Democrat woman appointed to board." It was unbelievable.

Some years later rules were clarified so that one appointed to replace a board member must be of the same political party and the election had to be by voice vote. In the meantime, as the first woman on the board and one of only five Democrats out of 25 members, I enjoyed a lot of freedom and attention. No one was threatened by



my political party status, that's for sure, and it was much easier to get support than it was when I was elected in 1992, one of 12 Democrats faced by 13 rather hostile Republicans.

In 1977 the issue of county-wide property assessments arose and it was controversial. There was disparity between Townships and certainly between Galesburg assessments and the rest of the county. Burgland fought the reassessment ideas, siding with the rural board members who had controlled county politics for a long time. But the city board members finally realized they outnumbered the rural members 15 to 10. The Galesburg board members caucused and decided to hang together and work for new assessment program.

I believe Burgland was infuriated, and he began the meeting of April 20, 1977 by quitting as chairman and asking for a vote of confidence. The board split, 11 to 11, with one abstention. Two city members joined nine rural members to support Burgland, the unlikely pair of Harold Wilson and me. I was the board member who brought up the issue of unequal assessments in the first place, but I certainly supported Dick Burgland for chairman. With Vice-Chair Willard Larson leading the meeting, after some discussion Burgland was given a unanimous vote of confidence. After that, Burgland appointed an assessment committee and the process of reassessing all county properties was begun.

Over the years, as I watched Dick lead our county board and saw him in church, we always grinned at each other without saying much. He knew what I was thinking, being grateful for his giving me a chance as a young woman. I admired him for many reasons and I hope he knew it. His kind of firm, knowledgeable leadership has been missed for a long time.

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