

COBO DEAL: FICANO'S DREAM



Robert Ficano

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DETROIT — Why is Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano pushing so hard for a regional Cobo Hall authority, even consenting to anti-Detroit terms demanded by Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson? Those terms include the elimination of provisions for Detroit's workers and businesses, and a guarantee that Detroit continue to pay Cobo's operating deficits.

Both conditions are included in the Public Acts, which would create the authority.

Following Ficano's "encouragement" of a mayoral veto of the Detroit City Council's Feb. 24 vote against the authority, Detroit's Interim Mayor Kenneth Cockrel, Jr. on March 2 obediently threatened such a veto.

"There are 43 communities in Wayne County," Ficano's spokeswoman Vanessa Denha-Garmo said in published remarks after Cockrel, Jr.'s threat. "All supervisors and mayors have the right to veto. Detroit shouldn't be any different."

Cockrel Jr.'s threatened veto conflicts with P.A. 554, the chief act which would create the authority. That act says it takes effect only if the Council does not disapprove the transfer of Cobo Hall.

Additionally, Detroit's City Charter mandates that only the Council can sell city property, except for water and sewerage and transportation assets. The sales of those must be approved by a vote of the electorate.

The council members who supported President Monica Conyers' resolution against the authority refused to reconsider their vote in the face of Cockrel's threatened veto, citing the elimination of preferences for Detroiters as one reason. They were President Pro-tem JoAnn Watson, Barbara Rose-Collins, Alberta Tinsley-Talabi, and Martha Reeves.

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT?

Ficano's role in creating the Cobo, Wayne County Land Bank, and Detroit Wayne County Health Authorities, among other endeavors, has caused some to question whether his final goal may be a Detroit-Wayne County government. Such city-county amalgamations have been formed in Louisville, Kentucky, Indianapolis, Indiana and other cities with large Black populations.

Heightening those suspicions are Ficano's replacement of Blacks in county government. Increasingly he has looked outside the city to others who represent a large portion of his campaign and PAC contributors and beneficiaries.

The Ficano PAC, for instance, supported Wayne County Commissioner Burton Leland, who led the drive to oust Commission Chair Jewel Ware in the wake of unproven, much-publicized allegations of corruption.

"The complete takeover of Wayne County government by suburban white and near-white supremacists has dealt Black power a death blow," said political commentator Peter Poyas. Poyas says, "County executive Robert Ficano, with Deputy Azzam Elder, Commission Chairman Edward Boike, Vice Chair Pro-Tempore Illona Varga, and Ways and Means chairwoman Laura Cox, takes THE CITY out of the game. "

Denha-Garmo was contacted for Ficano's response to these allegations, but Ficano had not returned the call by press time.

Ficano, his Deputy and Assistant Executives Azzam Elder and Turkia Mullin, along with John Rakolta, CEO of Walbridge Aldinger, a Detroit-based, international construction contractor, and Chuck Watters, Jr. of Hines Interests, a Houston-based, multi-national property management, developing, and contracting firm with assets of over \$13 billion, drafted the original plan for the Cobo Hall expansion and regional authority in 2006.

Rakolta and his wife contributed \$5,400 and Watters contributed \$3,000 to Ficano's campaign fund in 2008, part of a whopping \$1.3 million in a non-campaign year. Ficano does not face re-election until 2010.

Patterson's Deputy Executive Gerald Poisson laid out four conditions for Oakland County's support in a letter to Elder on Jan. 15, 2008.

"... as you have recommended and agreed to on their behalf, the City of Detroit must formally commit to annually covering any operational shortfalls," Poisson said in describing the third condition.

"The City must agree to the management of Cobo Hall by a professional private entity that employs competitive bidding procedures that do not include preferences," he went on. "All businesses and individuals residing, operating, and/or paying taxes in a jurisdiction being taxed to support the project must be given equal opportunity when it comes to bidding for and being awarded work on or at the Cobo Hall facility."

P.A. 554 leaves the way open for private management, forbids preferences, and does not require the authority to assume any operating deficit.

A legislative analysis of the package of House bills which were incorporated into the final Acts says, "...the local government will be responsible for the difference between costs and revenues. In addition the local unit will continue to be responsible for all costs of municipal services, such as police, fire, and emergency medical services, without additional compensation from the authority."

Ficano backed County Land Bank, Health Authority

Ficano successfully campaigned for the Wayne County Land Bank and the Detroit Wayne County Health Authority despite the opposition of Commission Chair Jewel Ware and other Detroit commissioners.

A county news release issued when the Land Bank Authority was created by a

narrow 8-6 vote in 2006 read, "The county treasurer receives about 1,000 properties per year in foreclosures. The total number is approximately 3,400, most located in the City of Detroit."

The disposal of that property, most of which is tax-reverted, is the responsibility of a five-member board governing the Wayne County Land Bank Corporation, as it is now known.

The board is chaired by Wayne County Treasurer Raymond Wojtowicz and directed by Ficano assistant Turkia Mullin. Former Detroit police chief Benny Napoleon, who previously ran against Ficano, is assistant director and secretary and County Commissioner Philip Cavanagh is treasurer. City and county contractor George Barnes, Jr. of Heritage Optical and County Commissioner Keith Williams.

Williams was the only County Commissioner from Detroit to support a resolution asking former Chair Jewel Ware to step down. Cavanagh has received campaign funds from the Ficano PAC.

Health Authority

The Detroit Wayne County Health Authority was established by Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2004, with the approval of Ficano and then Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. After initial opposition from Detroit City Council and Wayne County Commission members, those bodies signed on to it as well.

"Some 280,000 uninsured people in our communities and neighborhoods need access to convenient and quality medical care that helps keep them and their families healthy and the health authority is our key to achieving that for them," Ficano said at the time. "It's the key to leveraging millions in health care funds and ensuring the safety net for primary and preventive medical services. Our goal is to have a safety net that protects the uninsured and the tens of thousands of underinsured people as well."

A nine-member board consisting of three appointees each from the state, county and city governs the Authority, which receives extensive government funding. At the same time, the Detroit Health Department has been decimated by the loss of government funding, the privatization of its clinics, the closing of its methadone program, and contracting out of most of its previous work.

Granholm and Ficano have completely ignored the efforts of grass roots organizations like the Michigan Universal Health Care Network (MichUCAN) which advocate that the state provide universal health care. The Detroit City Council and even Paul Hillegonds, the former head of Detroit Renaissance, among numerous others, have supported the plan.

Ficano also announced in 2004 plans to build a tri-county regional jail and court complex. He appointed former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer and former state treasurer Doug Roberts to co-chair the panel. Ficano said the international Johnson Controls Corporation masterminded the idea. He failed to disclose that Archer sits on the board of Johnson Controls, which received lucrative contracts in Broward County, Fla. for a similar complex.

The complex would replace the City of Detroit police lock-ups, and incorporate

county and city courts.

Ficano additionally established a task force for a regional public-private Aerotropolis to serve the Detroit-Ann Arbor corridor. The Task force would be co-chaired by Ficano's friend John Rakolta, Jr. of Walbridge Aldinger and Wayne County Commissioner Joseph Palamara. It also includes Richard Blouse, head of the Detroit Regional Chamber, and Doug Rothwell of Detroit Renaissance and Jim Nicholson, CEO of PVS Chemicals, both of whom also sit on U.S. District Court Judge John Feikens' Business Leadership Group, which is seeking to diminish Detroit's ownership of its water and sewerage department.

Representatives of DTE, Ford Motor Company, GM, Northwest Airlines, Visteon, Masco and other corporations are also included.

The mayors of Taylor, Belleville, Romulus but not Detroit are public members. Other public officials on the board include Ficano's Deputy Executive Azzam Elder, administrators for Washtenaw County, Van Buren and Huron Townships, and officials from various public-private authorities. Detroit's representation is limited to George Jackson, CEO of the private Detroit Economic Growth Corporation.