

Charter Commission still shines through in November 2nd elections, can Dave Willis make it 6 out of 6

By Chad Selweski
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The Macomb County Charter Commission was supposed to consist of political fat cats who would stuff the county's first constitution with assorted pork and perks and, of course, cushy government jobs for all involved. Jaded critics predicted the document drawn up by the Charter Commission would feature a bloated bureaucracy designed to benefit the Good Ol' Boys club.

Instead, the 26-member panel turned out to be a model of good government. And the voters took notice.

In this month's general election, all five members of the elected Charter Commission who sought office won election. And it appears a sixth may be in the works.

In each case, the candidates campaigned on their 2009 success in creating a charter that emphasizes lean government, no new taxes and strict ethical standards for public officials.

Charter Commissioner Carrie Lynn Fuca of Harrison Township pulled off a rare election achievement by defeating an incumbent district judge. Fraser Democrat Marilyn Lane, vice chair of the Charter Commission, swam against the Republican tide and beat an anti-charter GOP candidate to win a state House seat. Jim Kelly of Eastpointe was elected to another term on the Macomb Community College board despite the anti-incumbent mood of 2010.

Charter Commissioner Bob Smith of Clinton Township scored a narrow Election Day victory after many political observers had picked him to lose. Charter Commissioner Harry Awdey of Armada won his second election, this time to the Armada Village Council — all at the age of 22.

Charter Commissioner Dave Willis, who has undertaken an amazingly early run for sheriff, could be No. 6. Willis seeks the appointment to replace Sheriff Mark Hackel when he takes office as the first county executive in January. The Center Line Democrat is also pursuing election as sheriff in 2012. He has already received a warm reception at a fundraising event and he has landed the endorsement of the Sheriff's Office corrections officers union.

Far from a collection of fat cats, the 26 charter commissioners were a diverse group that emerged from a huge field of 151 candidates. The commissioners elected in November 2008 included a fire marshal, a retired auto worker, two educators, a registered nurse, a retired state trooper, a former city administrator and a Republican Party staffer. This grassroots group consisted of 22 Democrats and just four Republicans. But a partisan divide never emerged.

Perhaps due to their eclectic nature, the charter commissioners tackled their job in a collegial, bipartisan, grown-up manner. Apparently, the voters appreciated the process and admired the end product of the commission's 180 days of work. The 26-page charter was approved by a solid 60-40 percent margin one year ago.

Charter Commission Chairman Jake Femminineo, a Mount Clemens Democrat who has no interest in using his role as a stepping stone to a political career, was proud of the 5-0 winning record of his colleagues on Election Day.

Awdey, one of those four Republican charter commissioners, seconded that sense of accomplishment. Awdey said the “special bond” among the charter commissioners continues. Smith and Lane campaigned together in Clinton Township last month. Charter Commissioner Donna Cangemi of Sterling Heights, a union official and a die-hard Democrat, called Awdey on election night to congratulate him.

The critics were wrong about the Charter Commission — and everything else they predicted about the entire charter process. Some of these Chicken Littles are still stunned that David Bonior is not the first — and forever — county executive.

It’s worth noting that none of those noisy critics was elected by the voters this time around.

That could be a coincidence. But I would say it was predictable.