**Making History in Michigan; Macomb County Executive**

The citizens of Macomb County Michigan will make history on Nov. 2, 2010 as they vote to elect the first County Executive into office. Opting for a change, the residents of Macomb County approved what became the Home Rule Charter of Macomb County, Michigan after nearly three years in the making. The curtain will come to a close on this historical process when one of three candidates is elected by the people to lead the county government in the role of County Executive.

The transformation of the Macomb County Government began with electing a Charter Commission to develop the charter, only the second home rule charter in the state of Michigan. Macomb County’s charter was approved by the Governor of Michigan, Jennifer Granholm, on June 21, 2009. The citizens of the county voted in favor of the charter in Nov. 2009. This approval began the final countdown to elect Macomb County’s first County Executive.

A **Home Rule Charter** is the power of a local city or county to set up a system of self-government without having to receive a charter from the state.

A home rule charter is a local constitution. The charter allows the municipality to reorganize its governmental structure.

Source: USLegal.com 2001-2010 http://definitions.uslegal.com/h/home-rule/

As the November election nears, three candidates vie for the position; Randall Shafer, Republican, Mark Hackel, Democrat and Erin Stahl, Libertarian. I had the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Shafer and Ms. Stahl to discuss their plans for the county if elected Executive. Mr. Hackel, the current Macomb County Sheriff, did not respond to my request for an interview.

**Randall J. Shafer, Republican Candidate**

I met Randall Shafer at Panara Bread. Not crowded, but filled with busyness. I sat still and focused on the man across from me. He rested his arm on the portfolio he brought that was full of his campaign work. With his sleeves rolled up, he appeared eager to share his story.

Immediately, Shafer was quick to point out his opposition to the county charter. Taken aback from his comment, I cringed wondering if I had gotten into something bigger here. None of my research had given me any clue about his resistance to the very document that initiated the role he sought.

Shafer explained the reason for his original opposition, saying he feared it would create another layer of government. As the charter began to unfold into a public document, the citizens reviewed and agreed with its purpose; Shafer changed his view. He now says that he appreciates the work put into the charter and praises the reader friendly approach to the document.

Shafer, a member of the Macomb County Republican Party, became involved in the race through his support of a fellow Republican, Simon Haddad. Shafer was comfortable with backing Haddad until as the campaign got moving; Haddad began delegating his self-proclaimed responsibilities. This lack of follow through on Haddad’s part motivated Shafer to put himself in the race. He took on Haddad in the primary election and came out with a surprising win.

Shafer is retired from the United States Army after twenty years of service. He compares running the county to the work he did in the Army. Shafer says in the Army it is important to negotiate and work together, “This is what people need to do in government.” Making reference to the significance of working together no matter what political party an individual belongs to.

We spoke about his priorities for office. He said his first task at hand as the County Executive was to audit the Sheriff’s Department and the other offices of the Macomb County elected officials. I asked Shafer if this was in compliance with the County Charter which states that “the executive will hold authority over all departments except the departments of the elected officials.” (Home Rule Charter 2009)

He countered, saying he has the right to call for independent budget audits. Producing a copy of the charter, he pointed out that an appointed Audit Committee will have the ability to call for an independent audit. Reminding him that audits are currently required throughout all public departments, Shafer conceded that he will have access to all program budgets ensuring that spending is allocated using the best practices of stewardship.

When the topic of his children came into the conversation, I could tell from how his eyes widened that he was a devoted father. He has two adult children from a previous marriage and an eleven year old son at home. Shafer showed a picture on his campaign flyer of him and his grandson, his daughter’s son. “I was giving him his first baseball,” pointing to the picture as a proud grandfather.

The happiness of a father showed as he spoke of his 22-year old son who recently enlisted in the Army. “He scored one point from perfect” referring to the test required for enlistment. Shafer also is the father committed to ensuring that the needs of his 11-year old son are more than taken care of while his wife, a Captain in the United States Army, serves the country in Afghanistan. “She will be home in two weeks.” His eyes filling as he tells me how supportive she is with his campaign. She will be home in time for the election.

We began to wind down our meeting. I asked him about the changes he will face going from a stay-at-home father to the man in charge of the county. “It will definitely be an adjustment for us. My son and I do everything together, he won’t go door to door with me, but he is my biggest fan.”

**Erin A. Stahl, Libertarian Party**

Erin Stahl agreed to meet with me to discuss her candidacy for County Executive. We met at a nearby Coney Island. This is a restaurant where the locals come for coffee, to grab a take-out or something quick to eat. The wait staff knew many people by name or by order.

**Home Rule Charter of Macomb County**

The charter clearly defines the authority, duties and the responsibilities of the Executive. Among the duties are the following:

* The Executive is responsible to supervise, coordinate and control all county departments.
* The exception being those departments run by elected officials:
  + Sheriff
  + Prosecutor
  + Clerk
  + Road Commission
  + Treasurer
* The Executive must submit reports and recommendations to the Commissioners of all matters of the county.
* The Executive must build and maintain intergovernmental relations, advocate for and develop proposed legislation which will benefit the interests of the county.
* The Executive is responsible for economic development, countywide planning and marketing the County.
* It is the role of the Executive to submit a proposed annual budget to the Commissioners.

Source: Macomb County Government. (2009) *“Macomb County Charter”* <http://www.macombcountymi.gov/clerksoffice/charter/charter-final.pdf>

Stahl and I sat in a small booth across from each other as we talked politics. She had spent the day babysitting her 2-year old nephew which she confessed made for an exhausting day. A divorced woman, with no children, Stahl says she spends time with nieces and nephews on occasion.

As we began our conversation, Stahl reflected on her past role as a member of the St. Clair Shores City Council. She also served as Mayor Pro Tem in St. Clair Shores in 2007. Stahl described herself as someone who is not afraid to stand up for the people she represents. She said it is not unlikely for her to be the one against six when it came to voting on issues she believed in.

I asked why she decided to run for County Executive. “We needed the right person in the position.” Stahl points to the report card she developed on her campaign flyer. She identified four areas in which she compared her experience to the other candidates’. She graded herself with A’s giving her opponents lesser credit.

Seeing it as her responsibility to gather and bring accurate data, reports and information from the departments to the Board of Commissioners, Stahl says of her role of County Executive, “I will provide the direction.”

I asked how she would respond to the needs of county employees who pour their heart and souls into their work to serve the citizens of the county. Stahl said she is aware that there are people working hard and she wants to go into the departments and see the work being done. She will look at every program the county offers to measure the effectiveness and ensure that grant programs and county supported programs are using the money for the programs and not carelessly spending.

As our discussion wrapped up, Stahl defined her present position to me. With a smile on her face, she said, “I am excited for what I can provide. It is my dream to make Macomb County a premier place to live, work and play.”

**Mark Hackel, Democratic Candidate**

I made several attempts to contact Mark Hackel, current Sheriff of Macomb County, running for County Executive on the Democrat ticket. I did not receive a reply from him or his campaign office. At this time in the race, Hackel is considered the front runner. His role as Sheriff provides the citizens a familiar name and face in the county.

Hackel’s campaign is very visible in the communities. His signs cover many city blocks as well as billboards and individual residences. A recent article in the Macomb Daily put his campaign earnings at $425,000. (“Hackel Shatters Macomb” 2010)

On his website, Hackel spells out his organizational plan with great detail. Hackel said, “I will bring “AAA” government to Macomb.” The “AAA” stands for: accountability, accessible to citizens and an advocate for the county. (“Marks plan” 2010)

His first priority is economic development and job creation. Hackel plans to counteract Macomb’s high unemployment rate with bringing jobs into communities using the county’s strengths to build on. Hackel will also look at the budget. He will look at consolidation and privatization. He will seek effective ways to balance the budget using good data to make informed decisions.

Hackel, being an elected official of Macomb County has the responsibility to present a balanced budget annually to the Board of Commissioners. This is an issue that as much as it can support him, may also hinder him. The subject of the Sheriff Department’s budget was an issue with the other candidates; it may or may not be an issue in November depending on who takes the lead.

**The Final Decision**

On Nov. 2, 2010, the final decision will come down to the residents of the county. I sent out a survey to twelve county residents seeking information from the everyday citizen about this election.

I received feedback from two surveys where the respondents said their interest in county government is a four and five on a scale of one to ten. One response was from a private school principle who pointed out her ability to operate a school on a limited budget and feels that the government should be able to as well.

On the night of the election, the votes will be counted; the banners will wave as conversations buzz with the name of the winner. The historical moment will be sealed as the Executive Elect prepares to take seat on Jan. 1, 2011. The lights will go off on the Macomb County that was, as the sun rises on the Macomb County that will be.

Disclosure: I am a voting resident and employee of Macomb County. I informed the candidates of this in my initial contact with them.

**Citations**

ErinStahl.com. (2010) “Biography.” Retrieved from: <http://www.erinstahl.com/BioErinStahl-MacombCountyExec.html>

Macomb County Government. (2009) *“Macomb County Charter”* Retrieved from: <http://www.macombcountymi.gov/clerksoffice/charter/charter-final.pdf>

Macomb County Government. (2009) “Upcoming elections candidate list” Retrieved from: <http://www.macombcountymi.gov/clerksoffice/ElectionDept.htm>

Macomb County Government. (2009) “Macomb County Profile.” Retrieved from: <http://www.macombcountymi.gov/aboutcounty.htm>

markhackel.com (2010) *“’AAA’ government for Macomb County”* Retrieved from: <http://www.markhackel.com/>

markhackel.com (2010) *“Mark’s plan”* Retrieved from: <http://www.markhackel.com/plan/section-1-economic-development-job-creation.html>

Selweski, Chad. Macomb Daily News. (2010) “*Hackel shatters Macomb County fundraising records.”*  Retrieved from: <http://www.macombdaily.com/articles/2010/10/09/news/politics/doc4cb12311db689917206200.txtM>

Selweski, Chad. Macomb Daily News. (2009) *“Macomb voters say yes to charter.”* Retrieved from: <http://www.macombdaily.com/articles/2009/11/04/news/srv0000006755111.txt>

USLegal.com (2001-2010) *“Home rule law and legal definition”* Retrieved from: <http://definitions.uslegal.com/h/home-rule/>