

A time to run

County needs office seekers wanting to make a difference

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With Tuesday's voting results in the books, it's vital for Genesee County's involved citizenry to concentrate on the next crucial election date. That's not the August primary, but May 16 - the last day for candidates to declare for local and state offices.

This year, let's have more than the usual and predictable office seekers. Instead, there should be some who surprise and inspire, who run to make a difference.

We have a heightened sense of urgency in this regard because of a huge leadership vacuum about to hit the county Board of Commissioners, whose chairman, Richard E. Hammel, is running for the state House.

Quite simply, there is no one in sight who can compensate for this loss. Among current members of the county body, Hammel is without peer in setting an agenda and having the political skill and respect to carry it out. With his departure, we're wondering who will champion the big-picture issues, who'll forge the necessary public and private-sector partnerships so essential for this community's economic rebirth.

With Hammel at the helm, Genesee County joined Automation Alley, the Oakland County-based high-tech consortium that is a key to plugging the Flint area into the so-called "knowledge economy." He also has been a big supporter of the county's Land Bank, which is removing enormous blight in old neighborhoods, as well as acquiring strategically important real estate, such as the Great Lakes Technology Centre.

When Flint was under a state takeover because of a massive deficit and mismanagement, Hammel opened county doors to supply the city with inexpensive expertise. Indeed, it's this vision he has for governmental cooperation and streamlining that we find most appealing. While he has never endorsed our goal for an elected county executive, he at least favors a full-time board chairman or manager. He also regrets that he wasn't able to combine the Flint and outcounty libraries and the city and county 911 systems. And Hammel has been the driving force behind a plan to do away with the autonomous road commission and put that responsibility squarely under the county board where it belongs.

On this issue alone, Hammel's absence could be felt quickly, as the only announced candidate for his seat, Clayton Township Supervisor Rod Shumaker, has declared his support for keeping the road commission as is.

Unfortunately, such complacency might find much company on the county board, whose members often behave as if government never has to change, no matter the demographic and economic shifts this community has experienced.

However, we believe the public is in the mood for more robust leadership, one that would shape the future rather than merely cope with what comes. If there are men and women out there who feel they have such qualities, your county and neighbors could certainly use you now.
