

Judge: Court plan now 'too political'

BY JASON ALLEY

THE NEWS-HERALD

LINCOLN PARK — The man who for years pushed for a court work program to be implemented is now being blamed for almost sabotaging it.

Councilman Thomas Murphy has remained strong that sending nonviolent criminals out to clean up the community is better than locking them up.

After years of debate, his colleagues came around and voted Feb. 22 to institute the program. It was supposed to begin within a month, but now, almost two months later, nothing has happened. And many in the city are pointing the finger at Murphy.

After the council unanimously approved the resolution giving the 25th District Court the jurisdiction to hire a supervisor to run the program, Murphy met with the judges, urging them to hire a friend of his.

Dead set against that because the man he wanted hired was a former employee of the

court who was laid off last year, the judges threatened to cancel the program completely.

"It has come to my attention that there is not a clear consensus from the mayor and council concerning the staffing and operation of the court work program," Judge David Zelenak wrote in an April 8 letter to the city. "Accordingly, the program will not be initiated at this time."

According to a letter he wrote to his colleagues, Murphy had planned to put forth his friend's name at Monday night's City Council meeting to be hired for the job. When it became apparent he didn't have the support needed, the man withdrew his name.

Working under the directive of the court in hiring a program supervisor, Zelenak said, his staff will now begin interviewing for the position. After advertising the job last month, he said, 10 applications were received.

"We see the validity of a court work program, but, at some point in time, this has all become too political where it should not have," Zelenak said.

"There was too much going on that could affect the independence and the validity of the program. There's a good chance this program can be up and running in a heartbeat, but it must be free from political influence."

As it will be the judges who decide which people to send to the court work program, Councilman Mark Kandes said, it's important that they are given the authority to operate it.

"The only way this program is going to run correctly is if the judges are happy with the program, are on board with it and are able to form the program in the direction they want, without any outside distractions and pressures," Kandes said.

Councilman Frank Vaslo said he's unsure why Murphy did what he did. When the

issue was voted on initially at the meeting, it was Murphy who proposed the hiring authority to the court. At the meeting, Vaslo publicly praised Murphy pulling the program together.

Now, he said, his colleague has gone far.

"Because of what I see as an attention Councilman Murphy to engage in cronyism and favoritism in the hiring practice program was jeopardized," Vaslo said.

"When it was obvious his man was going to get the job, Mr. Murphy and 40,000 residents are now with court work program. I have every confidence in the Lincoln Park judiciary; they will choose a supervisor based on qualifications and experience and their relationship with one councilman."

Murphy did not return a phone call for comment for this story.

Contact Staff Writer Jason Alley: ley@heritage.com or at 1-734-246-0867.

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