

tigation revealed that Colavita has worked himself into the processes of both the legislative and executive branches of the county government to an extent that makes him a de facto official of that government.

Commission inquiries over the past two and a half years have revealed that local governments throughout the State are often dominated by party leaders who are not elected by or accountable to the voters. In Westchester County, the Commission found a graphic illustration of this reality. In making recommendations, the Commission takes into account the inherent symbiotic relationship between leaders of government and the political parties from which they emerge, but at the same time seeks to eliminate practices which needlessly foster the perception that access to government may be obtained by making contributions to particular parties. In short, the reforms sought are aimed at drawing clearer lines of distinction between the political and governmental structures where appropriate and possible, and, to the extent that divisions are not feasible, making party leaders more accountable under the law for the influence they exercise.

In response to revelations made at the Commission's public hearings in November, 1989, County Executive Andrew O'Rourke has indicated that he will propose several

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Exec post goes to O'Rourke

By David Colton
Staff writer

The years of political frustration ended dramatically for county board of legislators Chairman Andrew P. O'Rourke on Tuesday night when Westchester Republican leaders gave him a prize he wondered if he'd ever get — county executive in 1983.

O'Rourke — long denied in his quest for a judgeship and left hanging for weeks as Republicans sampled more than a dozen county executive candidates — was finally named Tuesday night by his party's executive committee to replace Alfred DeBello.

After nine years as county executive, Democrat DeBello takes office as lieutenant governor Jan. 1.

"I look upon this as possibly one of the finest moments in my life to have you people designate me as your candidate," the 49-year-old Yonkers Republican told party leaders after being summoned hastily to GOP headquarters in White Plains to accept the endorsement.

The vote by 32 Republican city and town leaders was unanimous, and followed, as if by script, the recommendation of party chairman Anthony J. Colavita, who agonized over the selection since the November election.

"Andy O'Rourke is going to be an excellent county executive," Colavita said after Tuesday's meeting. "He brings experience and background in county government. He will not need on-the-job training."

O'Rourke, a lawyer, was expected to submit a letter today resigning the seat on the legislature he has held for nine years and through five elections.

His appointment as Westchester's sixth county executive appears certain by the remaining Republican majority on the county board, although the vote may not come this Thursday, as originally planned.



Andrew O'Rourke

DeBello, who with O'Rourke began his political career in the 1964 Yonkers City Council election, said late Tuesday night that he hopes to meet with O'Rourke this week to begin a transition. O'Rourke has promised few major changes in county operations.

Andy knows county government, and I'm sure we'll have no problems working together," DeBello said. "We worked together for 17 years."

But the unity Tuesday could not erase the sharp divisions that found GOP boosters of O'Rourke and Yonkers Mayor Angelo Martinelli battling head to head in the past few days. Some Republican county board members had gone so far as to threaten to defy the party and back O'Rourke if the committee picked Martinelli.

Colavita denied that was a factor, and O'Rourke, who some leaders fear cannot win a countywide contest, sought to smooth over the differences in his speech to party leaders. Foregoing his traditional grab bag of one-liners, O'Rourke made a point to praise Yonkers City Chairman Frank Coppola, who insiders say quietly backed Martinelli during the last two weeks.

"I need to know you a lot better, and you need to know me a lot better as the campaign develops," O'Rourke told the party leadership. He promised "an administration that is aware of the strong part the party plays."

And he predicted victory in a special election next November to fill the remaining two years in DeBello's term. "It doesn't make any difference who I run against," he said. "We'll win anyway."

Democrats mentioned for the job include former Congressman Ogden Reid, who is already promising to mount what could be a million-dollar campaign next fall; Greenburgh Supervisor Anthony Veteran; Harrison Supervisor John Passidomo; and Rep. Peter Peyser of Irvington, who lost his re-election bid in November.

In getting his party's nod, O'Rourke survived the stiffest challenge of his political career, rising from a field that at times appeared to include every leading Republican in Westchester, including Martinelli and state Sen. Joseph Pisani of New Rochelle.

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But after analyzing polls and television screen tests ordered last week, Colavita said, "On balance, Andy O'Rourke probably had a few more pluses." He added that it is "clearly understood" O'Rourke will remain the party's candidate to run in the special election next November.

O'Rourke's chances were probably boosted when his Republican colleagues on the county board lobbied on his behalf. One Yonkers legislator, who declined to be identified, had warned that "war will break out" if the committee went with Martinelli Tuesday night.

Edward Brady of Thornwood, GOP majority leader on the county board, was apparently relieved the threats were not put to a test, and said, "I'm sure we were listened to, and our opinions were respected."

Martinelli congratulated O'Rourke during a Yonkers City Council meeting Tuesday night and said he told Coppola "earlier in the day" he did not want the job. "I feel the Republican Party does not need a split right now," Martinelli said. "I can best serve here. Specifically, I felt this has gone as far as it can go."

But Yonkers sources said Martinelli only learned of O'Rourke's pending selection Tuesday afternoon, giving the 55-year-old mayor little time to publicly withdraw from the contest.

A major obstacle facing O'Rourke was that by law, no sitting county legislator can be named county executive. Republican leaders, concerned that Democrats may challenge the legality of O'Rourke's resignation to take the job, say they are now convinced his appointment will stand up in court.

Earlier in the day, Democratic County Chairman Thomas Carty confirmed that Democratic legislators are researching the legality of O'Rourke's resignation.

Brady said the legal issue is one reason that a special board meeting originally set for Thursday to appoint a new executive may be postponed if lawyers decide it might be risky to name O'Rourke to the post before a vacancy exists.

Brady also admitted that, "I called the meeting in hopes of spurring some action (by the leadership)."

O'Rourke's selection foreshadows a string of changes on the county board, with Brady, board Vice Chairman Andrew Albanese of Eastchester and Peekskill's Edward Gibbs expected to vie for the chairmanship in 1983.

O'Rourke's seat representing part of Yonkers could be filled before the end of the year, with three Yonkers City Council members — Katharine Karisky, John Jacoso, and O'Rourke's assistant, Nicholas Longo — and Yonkers Corporation Counsel Michael Eshelman viewed as potential choices.

Looking to his future job, O'Rourke said he would "not do too much boat-rocking — we have a reasonably good administration and no room for big changes."

Asked if O'Rourke would find surprises in the county's top post, DeBello said, "He's never been in the administrative branch. He'll find out he'll have to say 'no' an awful lot of times."