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O'Rourke says hospital board has prejudged his nominee

By Ed Tagliavanti
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Charging they are "prejudiced," County Executive Andrew O'Rourke attacked members of Westchester County Medical Center's Hospital Board and a county legislator for opposing his proposed hospitals commissioner.

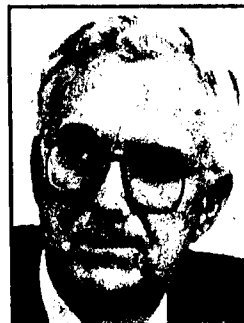
Carefully choosing the racially charged word and stressing he was using it "in its broadest sense," O'Rourke insisted he was not implying the board's members or Martin Rogowsky, D-Harrison, are biased against acting Commissioner Mack L. Carter Jr., because he is black.

But O'Rourke said they were leaving themselves open to such accusations, considering that the legislator and most hospital board members have never even spoken to Carter.

"There gets to be a point you say,



Mack L. Carter Jr.



Andrew O'Rourke

"What is going on here? Why are these people doing what they're doing?" And some of the answers to that are frightful," O'Rourke said, declining to elaborate.

Rogowsky and all but one member of the hospital board are white. Hospital

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board member Earl Moore, who is black, is one of nine members who on Monday filed a lawsuit in state Supreme Court seeking to block Carter from serving as acting commissioner until he is approved by the Board of Legislators.

Rogowsky is the only county legislator publicly to declare he will vote against Carter. He did so in a press release issued Tuesday.

Charges denied

When told of O'Rourke's comments, Rogowsky was apparently stunned.

"He said that about me?" he asked. "For Mr. O'Rourke to bring race into the confirmation process of Mr. Carter is a very sad day in Westchester County. I'm offended personally that Mr. O'Rourke would in any way associate my name with prejudice or racism in any form or shape."

Carol Farkas, chairwoman of the hospital board and a party to the lawsuit, also rejected O'Rourke's charge.

"I don't think that we are prejudiced. I think that we have an honest disagreement with the county executive and I don't think you need to meet somebody to decide whether they are qualified or not," she said.

"We have made a determination based on the facts that this man is unqualified. If you don't agree with someone that doesn't make you prejudiced."

Carter, the former deputy executive director of Lincoln Medical and Mental Health Center in the Bronx, started the \$141,120-a-year job on Monday. He declined to comment yesterday.

Speaking at a White Plains news conference, O'Rourke was visibly annoyed at the attacks on Carter.

"Using the word prejudiced in its broadest sense, meaning pre-judgment, Martin Rogowsky is prejudiced and I don't think he should vote on this," the county executive said. "It doesn't mean he is against black people, though I think one could raise that specter and I'm not going to do that, I'm just going to tell you that he is obviously prejudiced."

Referring to members of the hospital board, O'Rourke said, "I think they're prejudiced, certainly. I would not say they are prejudiced against black people, but I will tell you right now there's no doubt that they are prejudiced."

O'Rourke renewed his call for board members to quit if they cannot accept Carter. "I'll make sure none of them ever serves Westchester County again in any capacity."

He said that the board had endorsed Deputy Commissioner

Edward Stolzenberg for the post, even before O'Rourke began looking for a commissioner.

But Farkas said she was the only member of a six-person committee, established by O'Rourke to screen candidates, who voted for Carter as a possible finalist.

"As far as color of a person's skin goes, I can absolutely vouch on my life that there isn't a member of the (hospital) board who has one moment's concern about it," she said. "This person could have been white, green, black or orange, he would get the same reaction from the board if he came in with the same qualifications."

Race 'plays a role'

Rogowsky said he decided to oppose Carter because of the way O'Rourke set up a screening committee to keep politics out of the process, yet then bypassed the committee to select someone they did not endorse.

He said his decision was based on the same types of factors that prompted black organizations to oppose the U.S. Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas.

"I'm convinced he (Carter) is not the best-qualified person around," Rogowsky said.

But the county's two black legislators said they felt race was playing a role in the Carter case.

"I am starting to hear around the community from a number of people who are responsible, credible African-Americans, who are very concerned about this whole process and they feel Mack Carter is not getting due process," said Herman Keith, D-Yonkers.

"I think that some people might feel that it is not a (medical) center that an African-American should be running," Keith said. "I don't know if they're looking at qualifications. I think they might be looking at skin color here."

Keith said that in his eight years on the board "I have not witnessed one (appointment) that had the kind of opposition that this appointment has. One wonders about it. What is the real basis for it."

"There is a hue and cry for the man's ouster before he gets in. When that happens, one does start to wonder what is the agenda," said Legislator Ernest Davis, D-Mount Vernon. He questioned Rogowsky's decision and termed the hospital board's actions "frightfully arrogant."

Davis said he was sure Carter's opponents do not think race is affecting their thought process.

"But what is there left?" he said. "They don't know the guy."