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Interview with Robert Durban

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Researcher: Anne Smetak

Event: Interview with Robert Durban

Place: 110 E. High Street, Mt. Vernon

AS: This is Anne Smetak, it's December 10th 1999. I'm here with Bob Durban in the Knox County Commissioner's Office
How long have you lived in Knox County?

BD: 65 years. I was born and raised here, so...

AS: Did you go to school here as well?

BD: Fredericktown.

AS: How long have you worked in this office?

BD: It'll be five years on December 31st.

AS: What is your position exactly?

BD: I'm the chairman of the board, president of the board of Knox County Commissioners.

AS: Could you give me a little background on what a County Commissioner does?

BD: Our basic job relates to the fiscal management of the county. We appropriate all the money and designate it to each department and they make their requests and so on. [Gets a poster describing local government function for me] The principle responsibility of the County Commissioners is to manage the money. We're in charge of all the buildings, the maintenance, the upkeep, even the janitorial service of the buildings. We have a water and wastewater department that we're responsible for, the human services director is hired by the county commissioners, and we're responsible for that department under the new workforce development act. WIA. We just got this yesterday, it's the plan that, and I haven't even opened it yet. That's what we have to do to comply with the new workforce investment act. We have until 7/1, the end of the state fiscal year...[talking about the act]

All the agencies submit a budget to us. Traditionally there's two or three million dollars we have to cut out of their requests, and our general fund is about 10.5 million dollars right now. All together with all the funding that comes through this office, it's about 37million dollars that we're responsible to distribute and make sure it's properly spent. We approve all contracts for all the agencies, any contract has to go through here, regardless of if it's for paperclips or to do a

10million dollar renovation on the building across the street, it all has to go through here.

AS: So your main responsibility, if we were talking about the provision of Social Services in the county is distribution of funds to those organizations?

BD: That's correct. In this case with the grant that we're getting, we have to have a board of...I believe there's twelve members of that board and they're designated who they have to be from a church, and a school person and a labor union person, and that type of thing. There's, I believe twelve of them all together. We meet twice a year to discuss funding for this. And minutes of those meetings have to accompany the application back in, so they see that you're doing what you're supposed to do. And there are time lines and everything has to click and traditionally the money we get from them is not sufficient to last a full year. I think they run out...they're pretty much out of funds down there right now. It just doesn't last. And in Mount Vernon we really don't think of having homeless people, you don't see them laying on the street or anything. But they're out there and we hear about them, when it gets cold or the weather's really bad or something, but...

AS: Have you had any increases in the amount of money requested by those orgs since you've been here?

BD: No, they pretty much stay within the grant. Some of the funding that we give to the senior citizens center out here, we provide, in fact we just past yesterday their request for 10,000\$ towards the operation of that program there. And homeless people can go there for help. But they usually refer them to Interchurch. If it comes right down to it, if they can't get help anywhere, someone's going to help them. We hope nobody's sleeping on the street. We've heard of people sleeping in cars, and different places and stairways and...it's difficult.

AS: How large of a problem do you consider homeless to be in this county.

BD: Well, I don't think it's a major problem, but it could be if we have a major recession, a lot of people are living beyond their normal means right now. I think if we had a recession and a lot of people were laid off, we're gonna see a lot of it. And hopefully, the predictions are correct that we're going to have a prosperous time for many years, or several years to come.

AS: Would you as a commissioner like to see a homeless shelter in Mt Vernon?

BD: Well, I don't know that a shelter itself would be justifiable in Knox County. I don't think we have that many homeless here, that we would have a number of people in it on a daily basis. I know KnoHoCo and Interchurch have a couple homes and apartments and house trailers, or mobile homes...that they put people in when...if there's a family or something, they try to get those people into an apartment or something like that for 30days or whatever it takes to get them back on their feet and get them going.

AS: Do you think that's sufficient?

BD: Well, I don't really know. I've not heard any feedback from the agencies that provide those that they're having more requests than they have room for. But a lot of people out there are too

proud to make a request or something, I don't know. They don't request anything until we find out about them and offer some assistance and they'll take it. But they won't, a lot of people won't come forward. And I'm not sure if I were out there I think I wouldn't be too proud to ask for a little help.

AS: This is more your opinion as a member of the Knox County community. Have you always been aware of a homeless population in the county?

BD: No, I didn't know that until I came into this office five years ago and the first thing I picked up was this. It came in just about the same time I came in the office and it was thrust on me being the rookie, there were two older commissioners here so...No I had no idea there were homeless in Knox County. I thought we were exempt from that for some reason. I never though about it. And I was the mayor of Fredericktown for 6 years before I came here. So I didn't know. We didn't have any problem in Fredericktown that I was aware of. Actually there was, and I didn't even know it.

AS: Do you think that's a fairly common sentiment among Knox County residents?

BD: Yes, I do. I think they're not aware that there are homeless people out there, or very many. They may think there's one or two, but maybe I shouldn't make a guess but I think the last number I heard was about 27 in the county. And maybe you know from Interchurch more accurately...

AS: I only really know estimates...

BD: Well, that was the last number I heard and it's been some time since I've heard.

AS: So you say you meet with the groups twice a year?

BD: Twice a year.

AS: Do they present their case to you as, this is the number of homeless people we have, this is the problem, or is it a fairly cut and dried meeting of this is the money we need?

BD: Well, no it's not because sometimes we have to move money and the board has to do it too. I can't, being Chairman of the board I can't just move money from this account to this account. Some years are different in the needs. For some reason some years they'll need more rent money, sometimes they'll put people up in a hotel, and they have a larger number of people they have to put up so they've used all of their rental money, but they may have had fewer hot meals served so they have some money there that they're not going to use, so the board kind of arranges it to have a little more balance so that they can continue to provide all the services that they have.

Nothing's ever cut and dried when you get 13 people in a room and I can go through all these numbers and there's one person that has to come from the homeless community that's required to...

There's a list of them in here I believe...who all has to be on there. ...[looking through papers]

AS: What's the name of this board?

BD: It's the Emergency Food and Shelter program board. It's a national program, the money's federal money.

AS: Most of those people are also on the Emergency Needs Coalition, I don't know if you know about it?

BD: I've heard of it, but I'm not really familiar with it.

AS: They meet once a month and the social services discuss what needs to be done, etc...

BD: It takes a lot of perseverance in a lot of cases to get a program started...and I don't really know where the money would come from. The county can put some money into the program if it's necessary. We don't budget for it, but there's usually some funding available that we can contingency funding...

AS: Again on your community experience, how would you define rural homelessness?

BD: Rural homelessness...I believe that if a person...a person becomes homeless when they really don't have a place to go, they don't have family or anyone else who is willing to help them, even over a short period of time to have shelter. A lot of families, when someone is down a lot, I shouldn't say a lot. But some families will practically disown that person because they think that they can help themselves and they've helped them a lot over the years maybe and they're not going to help them anymore. And it's a reality check at that time. In these times of prosperity I know there's a lot of jobs out there begging to be filled, I think that these people could find something to do if they really wanted to get a job they could do it. There are people out there who are not educated and there are jobs out there that do not require a lot of education and it's minimal wage probably in a lot of cases, but to me it would be better than sleeping under the bridge.

AS: Moving back towards your experience as a commissioner, does local government in Knox County use the McKinley definition of homelessness? I don't know if you're familiar with it>

BD: No I'm not.

AS: It's just a basic federal definition of homelessness.

AS: Is there anything I haven't asked you about the topic that you think it would be important for me to know?

BD: I think there are a lot of compassionate people in Knox County who, if they were made aware, would be maybe more helpful to the program. And I'm not sure how you make that awareness known to the right people. I know we do an advertisement in the news every year for the different agencies telling them that this money is available to them. And interchurch usually ends up with it...I guess that's about all I know of the situation.

AS: Thank you very much.