

Tangle of Controversy Snags Legal Aid Board

The State Legal Aid Board meeting in Anchorage last weekend ran into a tangle of controversy and power plays that resulted ultimately in the resignation of three board members.

The board met with the intention of choosing an executive director but failed to do so when the meeting ended in a stalemate between opposing groups. On one side were Community Action Agency officials, board members representing geographic areas of the State for the needy, and on the other side were the representatives of the legal profession.

Announcing their intention to resign after the meeting failed to produce results were Don Neuman, Ketchikan; Mrs. Stella Martin, Juneau; and Paul Tiulana, of Nome.

The specific controversy generated around the candidacy of Anchorage attorney Allen Merson, for the post of executive director. Two other candidates for the post withdrew their applications shortly before the meeting when it was learned the salary would be reduced to \$15,000 after March 1, 1967. This left Merson the only remaining candidate.

The members of the legal profession present opposed Merson on the grounds that he did not qualify, although Merson had an imposing amount of backing for the position.

Backing Merson were A

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Fothergill, ASCAP Director, representatives from other areas of the state representing the impoverished, and several withdrawn candidates for the position.

Reportedly the Ketchikan and Juneau Bar Associations opposed Merson, the Anchorage Bar was split, and the the Fairbanks Bar was neutral. The attorneys on the Board also charged that they had not been kept informed of the program, and were upset when they learned that the program could have been organized separate from ASCAP.

In the middle of the controversy were representatives of the Fairbanks and Anchorage Community Action Agencies. They were Mrs. Coleen Redman and Samas N. Owen.

The Board voted to continue its present grant until it is up in March, and at that time apply independently from ASCAP and ask to be named a direct grantee.

The move for independence was of interest in that ASCAP recently went through a similar struggle to become free from the state government.

ASCAP Director Al Fothergill expressed disappointment

and disgust over the action of the board. He said it would fragmentize the program until it was ineffective.

"We don't want any two-bit piece-meal, bar-controlled program in every community. The poor are supposed to be represented," he said.