

Capitol standoff: Dems, GOP duck action

Hot topics are tax decrease, reapportionment

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The invocation was given by Sen. Connie Blinfield (R-Maple City). As we celebrate this holiday season, let our spirits rise. We pray that the bright lights of Christmas and the candles of Hanukkah will warm us with love, spread love among us, bring peace to this body and to the world — that these lights may give us vision to see beyond today and to do the best for the people of this state for tomorrow. Amen.

That's all that happened Wednesday in the Michigan State Senate, which convened at 10 a.m. and recessed at 10:31 after taking attendance. In the House of Representatives, the business sessions have run a half-hour or so, covering relatively minor matters. Major issues such as mandatory auto seat belts and homosexual rights have been dodged.

In short, legislative action in Lansing has ground to a halt. Each party blames the other. "We should adjourn for the year," said Sen. Richard Fessler, R-Union Lake. "There's nothing that couldn't be dealt with in January."

TWO TOPICS are under discussion — the state tax rate and legislative reapportionment.

Democrats want to reduce, ahead of schedule, the 35 percent personal income tax increase which inflamed voters into recalling two senators who supported it. Gov. James J. Blanchard is against it because the \$25 million state surplus he anticipates is too small to justify a premature cut.

"If there is a significant surplus in the state treasury, we will have a plan to roll back," House Speaker Gary Owen, D-Ypsilanti, said in an interview. "We would do this not to please the recallers, but to disprove the myths and assure the people they (treasury) are keeping only the money needed. . ."

The reapportionment discussion may be hotter than the tax talk.

REPUBLICANS were incensed when the 19 Democrat senators approved — with the 18 Republican senators opposed — a plan only one year after the 1982 reapportionment — that will cost at least two Republican senators and six or seven representatives their seats. The vote came the night ex-sena-

tor David Serotkin was recalled but before election results were certified.

Democrats insist districts now vary as much as 16 percent from the statistical mean. They say their plan reduces the variance to 8 percent.

The questions are when and if the House Democrats will use their 63-47 majority to push the plan through, and then whether Gov. James J. Blanchard will sign it.

Republicans at first talked of taking the reapportionment plan to the voters via referendum. They found they can't.

"The Democrats put a small amount of money in the bill for publishing," noted Sen. R. Robert Geake, R-Northville. "It therefore becomes an appropriation bill and can't be taken to the voters for a referendum. Check your Constitution."

(It's Art. 2, sec. 9: "The power of referendum does not extend to acts making appropriations for state institutions. . .")

WHAT CAUSED the breakdown in debate, the total distrust of one party for another? The question was put to a Democratic representative from Wayne County and a Republican sena-

tor from Oakland. They were interviewed in their offices as most of the capital press corps staked out a Senate Democratic caucus with Gov. Blanchard.

"I trace it all the way back to Nov. 7," said Rep. William Keith, D-Garden City, now in his sixth term. "Some 40 new members were elected to the House. Almost the first issue they faced was the tax increase."

"Many of them were inexperienced in government at any level. To them, the dirty word is 'compromise.' But compromise is essential to government."

"Not to be facetiously partisan, I really blame the Republican caucus," Keith went on. "Mike Busch (Republican leader from Saginaw) and Gary Owen worked desperately for a compromise. We had a brand new governor with a Democratic Senate and House and a desperate problem."

"NOBODY disagreed we needed revenue. The questions were, how much, how long and where would it go?"

"But Busch told us their caucus fell apart. The members were inexperienced in the art of compromise."

Keith didn't let his fellow Democrats off the hook. "Democrats took the arrogant attitude that if they won't help, we'll just pass the thing."

His count on inexperienced lawmakers was close. Of the 110 House members, 38 were freshmen; of the 38 senators, 16 were in their first term, although many had had previous service in the House.

FESSLER, in his first Senate term after eight years in the House, placed the blame on Democrats because "we had a list of things we were willing to negotiate with."

Republicans, he said, sought modifications of the single business tax, changes in workers compensation and changes in the property tax as their price for supporting an income tax increase.

"He (Blanchard) just didn't want to listen. There was a total lack of communication with the Republican caucus. They decided to run roughshod over us."

Fessler saw two problems "over there" on the Democratic side.

"The liberal Democrats are afraid they were dealt a bad hand on (the

1982) reapportionment. And Democrats are afraid, because of the turmoil, the reapportionment will lead to recall," he said.

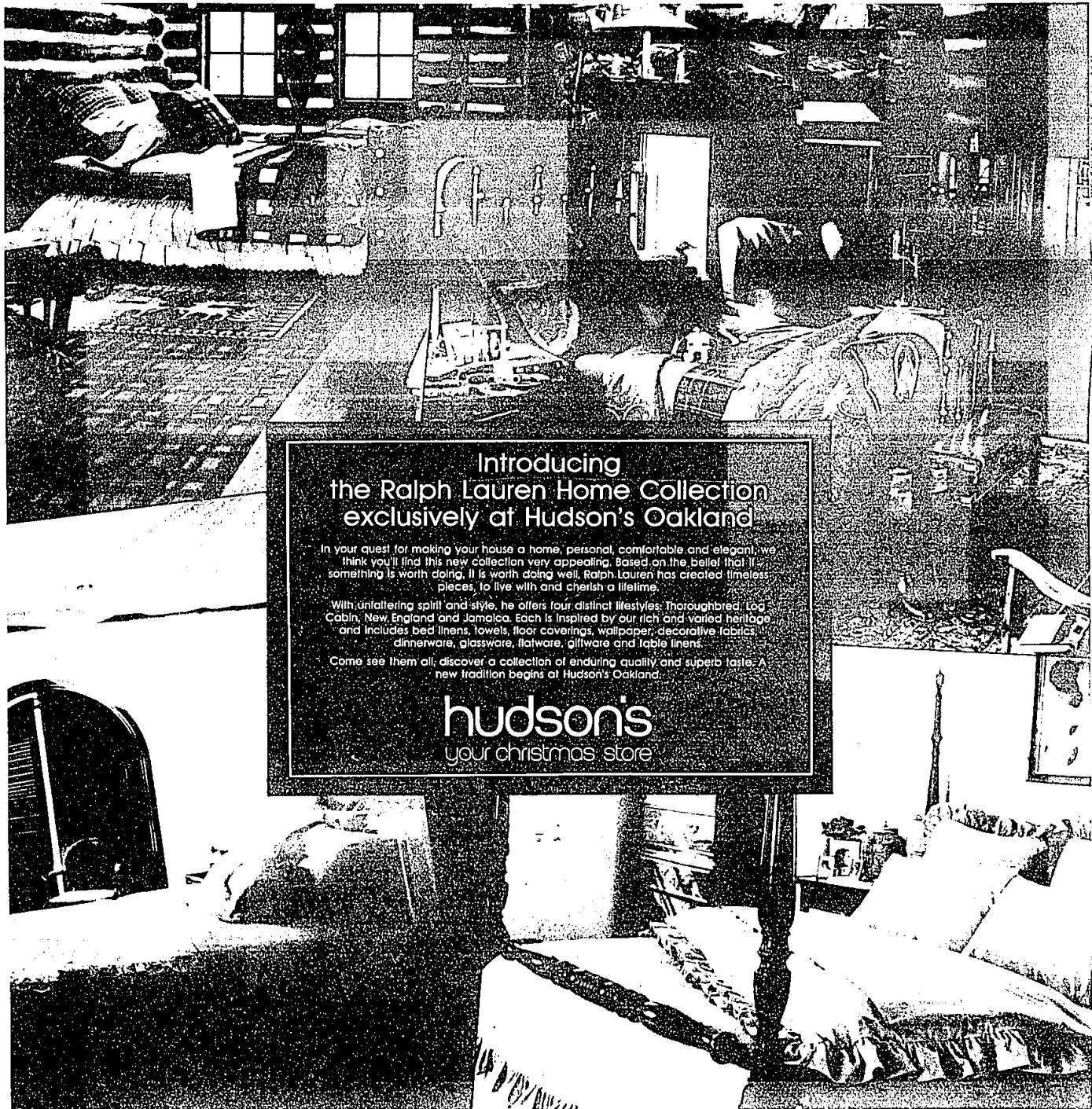
WHEN 1983 opened, Democrats held a 20-18 majority. That has now changed to an 18-17 Republican majority because of the recalls of two Democratic senators and the serious illness of Sen. Joe Mack, D-Ironwood. Could this Republican majority reconsider the reapportionment bill and defeat it?

"We could send a respectful message to the House asking them to return SB 3 (the reapportionment bill) to the Senate," Fessler replied. "Normally, they would carry the bill back. In this case, I'm not so sure they would."

"We requested a meeting. We want to ask if he (Blanchard) is going to sign the reapportionment bill," said Fessler. So far, no luck.

FESSLER SAID the Legislature is unable to act, and the situation is making the first-term governor look bad.

"The governor has brought us very little (in proposals). We've passed what he has brought us. His only legislative priority in spring was the tax increase; in June it was Job Corps; in fall, the Michigan Strategic Fund."



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